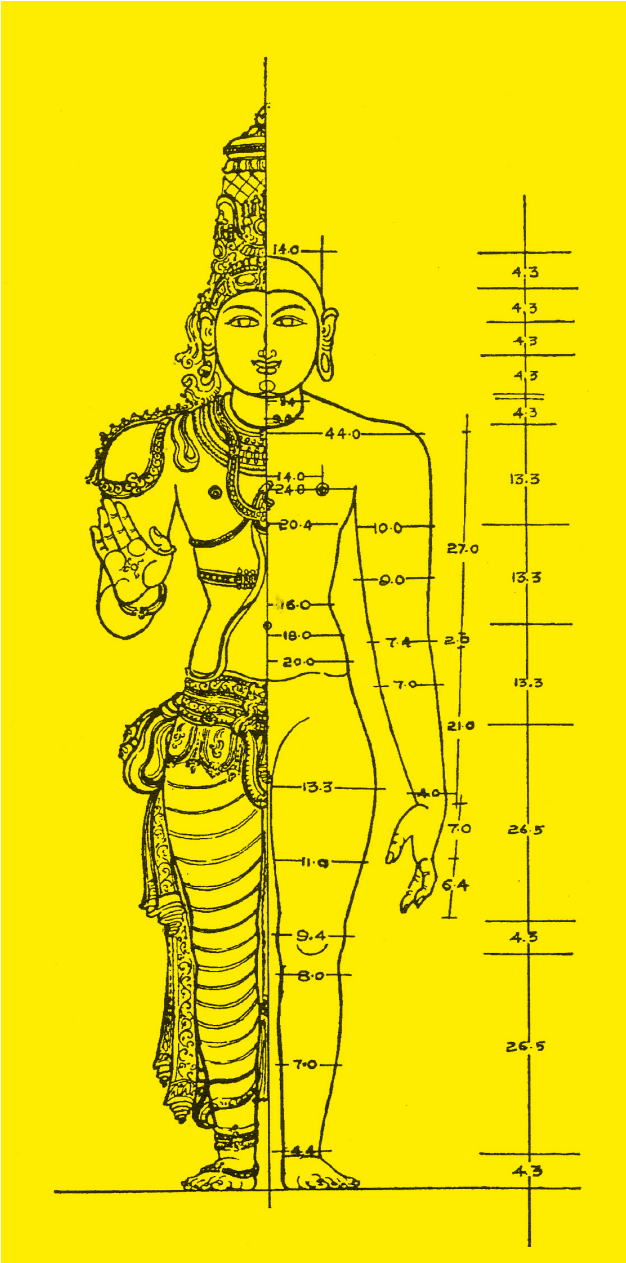
VAIṢṆAVA ICONOLOGY

Based on Pañcarātra Āgama



By Pt. Sri Rama Ramanuja Achari

srimatham.com
2013

Contents

Introduction to Iconology 3
Theology of the Pañcarātra 13
Chart of Vyūha correspondances 15
Vishnu Tattva — Understanding Vaishnava Iconography 18
The Weapons 23
The Ornaments 27
The Attendants 30
The eternal consorts of the Lord 33
1. Lakshmi 33
Aṣṭha-lakṣmī — The 8 forms of Lakṣṃī 34
2. Bhūdevī & 3. Nīlā Devī 35
The other consorts of the Lord 36
The Gestures (mudras) 38
The Accessories 39
The Āḷvārs 41
The Incarnations 43
Avataras and Navagrahas 48
Vishnu as Surya Narayana 49
Hanuman 51
Kāma-deva — Lord Viṣṇu's son 52
The minor Incarnations of Vishnu 54
Other Popular Forms of Viṣṇu Worshipped 59
The Four Major Viṣṇu Temples 60
Explanatory Texts 62
Vishnu-Narayana by Swami Chinmayananda 66

INTRODUCTION

Iconology is defined as the study of the symbolism behind sacred images. One of the most prominent tools of devotion in Hinduism is the use of images. These images or icons are made of wood, stone, metal or painted on cloth.

Definition; Icon (*ikon*) is a word derived from the Greek and is defined as an image or representation of a religious figure. Iconology or iconography is the study of icons.

The term generally used by non-Hindus and unfortunately by Hindus themselves when referring to these sacred images is IDOL. This term is actually pejorative — a demeaning, insulting word first used by Christian missionaries who perceived Hinduism in an extremely negative way — describing us as pagans, heathens and idolaters. The use of images is also predominant among Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians who refer to sacred images as ICONS to differentiate them from the idols of the heathens.

An icon can be defined as a sacred symbol which embodies a spiritual truth and is worthy of veneration and contemplation. All Hindu icons are visual representatives of God and the Spiritual Forces which support, sustain and direct the Cosmos. The art and symbology of Icons has been developed to an extremely sophisticated degree by the Hindu mind. Each and every feature of an icon has a profound truth behind it, and all the mystical teachings of the sages is presented to the spiritual seekers through the means of these icons and symbols.

Icons are the most predominant aspect of our faith and yet the study of their meaning is also one of the most neglected aspects of our religious education. Over thousands of years art, narratives, music and dance have been used to convey the highest, most profound and complex spiritual truths. Most often their utility and influence have been neglected or overlooked. In this book I am attempting to revive the study and meaning of the sacred symbols so that we can all appreciate and value what our ancestors and gurus have generated and handed down to us.

How can frail mortal human beings, praise, worship and develop a loving relationship with a Being that we cannot understand, know or feel? So God out of His boundless compassion, condescends to take a material form and to manifest Himself to us so that He may receive our offerings, worship, praise and devotion, and in turn can bestow upon us His Grace and blessings. The icon is the point of meeting, where aspiring mankind meets the descending Godhead.

The Technique of Icons

The icons in which the Godhead manifests itself are thus not merely "representations" of the Godhead but are in fact a “focus” or “locus” of the Godhead. This means that God is actually present in the icons. How is this doctrine justified? Firstly God is omnipresent (all-pervading), omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipotent (all-powerful). The entire creation is pervaded by the Godhead, there is no place or thing in this universe which is devoid of the presence of God. So naturally it follows that the Godhead is also present in the icon. When the icon is properly consecrated according to the prescribed rites — God is implored to be especially present in the icon out of compassion and love so that we in turn may love and adore Him/Her. Secondly God is the Inner-witness who knows our every thought and emotion, and Scripture tells us that God always responds to our devotion. So God with a small fraction of His limitless being takes up residence in the consecrated icon in a very special and specific way, and because by definition God is omnipotent — all-powerful, this empowering of the icon is certainly no effort on his part!!

Terminology

In Sanskrit there is a very rich terminology that is used when referring to icons;

bera — image
mūrti — anything which has definite shape and physical limits, an embodiment or incarnation.
bimba — reflection or prototype — the original or model after which a thing is copied (the Original Being of course is God)
vigraha — extension, expansion, form.
pratima — resemblance, similitude, representation
pratīka — symbol
rūpa — form, aggregate, a sum total of form.
arca — object of adoration and worship

According to the doctrines of the Agamas, the Supreme Being is transcendent and Absolute and beyond the comprehension of the finite human mind. But because of His limitless compassion and love for His creation and by a ray of His divine potency, He takes up abode in the icon which is constructed strictly according to the dictates of the scriptures and consecrated accordingly. Such a descent (arca-avatāra) takes place for receiving the devotional service of the devotees and for bestowing grace upon them in return.

The Purpose of Icons

All of human understanding and interaction takes place through the use of symbols. Words are symbols which convey and communicate a universally accepted meanings or idea. In the spiritual science of the Vedas the entire universe is said to comprise of name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*). If one does not have the vocabulary (*nāma*) one cannot understand an experience (*rūpa*) and if one cannot understand and define an experience to oneself, one cannot share it with others. The purpose of the icon is to represent, through a combination of forms and proportions, some fundamental aspect of the cosmos and it's presiding consciousness which is not directly perceptible by our senses. Although these cosmic realities cannot be perceived, they can be experienced, the icons are the vocabulary whereby we interpret the experience of the divine to ourselves and convey that understanding to others.

The Supreme Being is all-pervading and intimately close. The entire universe is pervaded within and without by Him. He cannot be confined to the icon because of His all-pervasiveness but through the power of mantras (sacred formulae) and *mudras* (ritual gestures) the Divine Essence is invoked into the icon and He, through His infinite mercy condescends to take residence in the gross object for the purpose of receiving the worship of His devotees and bestowing Grace. In other words the divine Presence is particularized or focused in the icon. The energy that is already there is awakened, it does not enter from somewhere outside. The image of stone or brass is thus transformed into a living entity. Its actual shape and ornamentation are symbolic and convey meaning in every single aspect. Once the invocation ceremony (*prāṇa-pratiṣṭa*) has been performed, the icon is no longer regarded as merely 'symbolic' but as a mūrti which means 'a materialization or embodiment' of the Divine.

Theological and Scriptural support for the use of icons.

na ca rūpaṃ vinā dhyātuṃ kenapi śakyate ||
sarva rūpa nivṛttā hi buddhiḥ kutrāsya tiṣṭhati |
nivṛttā glāyate buddhir nidrayā vā parīyate ||
tasmād vidvān upāsīta buddhyā sākaram eva tam |
asti tasya parokṣaṃ tad iti kiñcid anusmaret ||
sarvathā akāram uddiṣṭaṃ na parityajya paṇḍitaḥ ||

*Without a form how can God be meditated upon? If he is completely formless, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to it will slip away from meditation, or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering however that it is an indirect method, a particularization or indication of that which is completely formless. (*Vishnu samhita 29:55 — 57)

The theology of the Pañcaratra affirms that the Supreme Being is a *Personal* God but at the same time declares that His form is undefinable (*anirdeśya*), incomprehensible (*acintya*) and infinite — i.e. unconditioned by Time and Space (*ananta*). This seems to be a contradiction because "personality" has limitations whereas the Supreme Being is declared by the Vedas to be free of every form of limitation!

All manifested beings are definable and comprehensible because of the four common characteristics which can be pointed out and understood;

1. *jāti* — genus or species, race, caste etc
2. *guna* — attributes such as black/white, tall/short etc.
3. *kriya* — activity such as walking, crawling, standing etc,
4. *sambandha* — relationship to other things and beings such as father/son, master/servant, possession/owner etc.

- As far as the Supreme Being is concerned no genus (source) can be postulated as He is the source of the entire creation and pervades it with a fraction of His potency.
- He is a repository of every positive quality imaginable in an inestimable degree, and He is devoid of every negative quality.
- His actions are incomprehensible because He pervades everything and therefore every conceivable activity is simultaneously His.
- His relationship to the universe is essentially inconceivable and can only be described in allegorical terms such as *śarira-śariri sambandha* — the Lord is to the universe as the soul is to the body. But all the allegory possible cannot adequately describe His intimate relationship with the universe and the individual Self.

It is for these reasons that the Lord is declared to be Personal but inconceivable and indescribable.

In the Vishnu Samhita 29; 49b — 58. It is pointed out that it is beyond the capabilities of an average human being to adequately conceive of the Supreme Being for the purpose of contemplation. The human mind relies on concepts and forms and contrasts, in order to focus its thinking processes. Without a definitive content, the mind wanders and contemplation becomes impossible. So therefore the Agamas have prescribed the use of symbols for focusing the mind and providing content upon which to meditate. This content itself must be meaningful, in order to bring about the required change of consciousness.

In the Parama Samhita 3:7 it is stated;

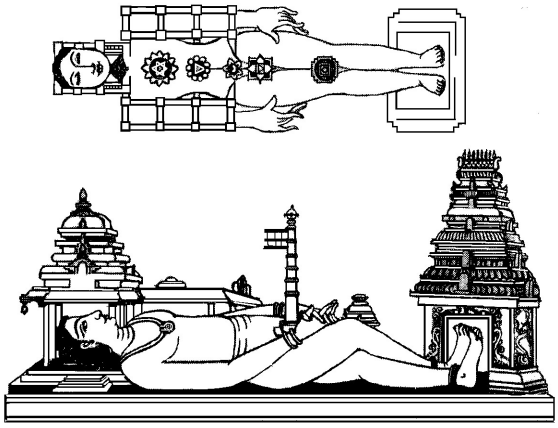
nirākāre tu deveśe na arcanaṃ saṃbhave nṛṇām ।
na ca dhyānaṃ na ca stotraṃ tasmāt sākāram arcayet ॥

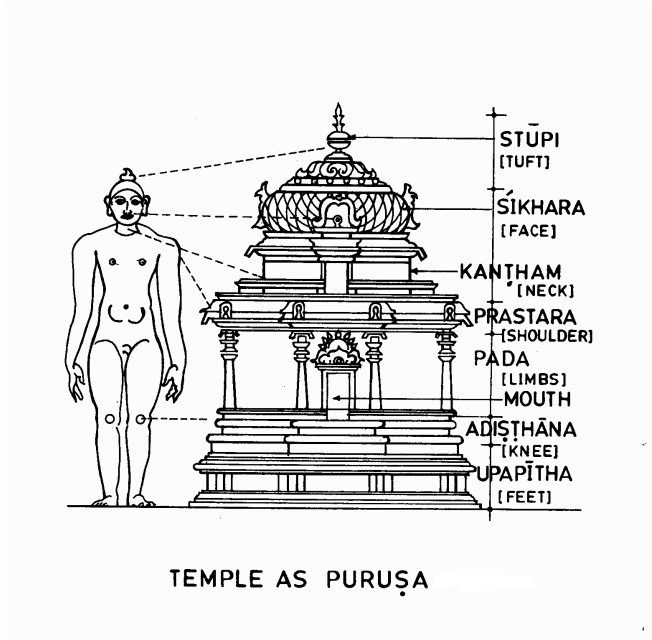
It is impossible for the human being to worship, meditate or praise a deity without form. Therefore the Lord should be worship through an icon.

The Sriprashna Samhita 18;1 affirms that the descent of the Lord into a permanent iconic abode is due to His Divine Initiative alone, for bestowing grace and blessings upon the devotees.

The Temple Structure and Icons

The human body is the temple for the Indwelling Spirit of God (*Antaryāmin*). All the various parts of the temple structure correspond to various parts of the human body. The temple is the physical body which houses the presence of God. So the actual building of the temple itself is a symbol of the presence of God in the world. The temple with all its intricate imagery represents the universe in all its variety and just as on the macrocosmic scale the universe is the *body* of the Lord so on a microcosmic scale when the icon represents the manifested Lord; the temple is His Body.





The Forms of the Icons

In the Parama Samhita 3:6 it is pointed out that the Icons of the Lord have to be human in form. Because when the Lord wishes to grant His mercy to humankind He takes the form of a human being.

athā puruṣa-rūpeṇa kalpayitvā tam acyutam |

Therefore the Imperishable One should be conceived of in a human form.

Each particular deity is shown in various ways with different paraphernalia, several arms, heads, weapons, ornaments and animal vehicles, accompanied by their consorts. Each and every one of these objects has an esoteric significance as is explained in the various Puranas like Vishnu Purana, Srimad Bhagavatam and the Agamic literature as well as the Upanishads such as Gopala-uttara-tapini Upanishad. The number of hands represents various attributes, the nature of which are indicated by the weapon (*āyudha*) held. In general a large number of hands indicates a more rajasic character — for example Sudarshana, and the fewer the hands the more sattvik is the nature of the deity depicted.

Types of Icons.

Two types of icons are encountered in the temple. There is the main deity which is usually carved out of stone or sometimes in the case of very large icons such as in Srirangam temple they are molded out of plaster. This is known as the **mula vigraha**, and once installed can never be removed — this icon receives all the daily services. The second type of icon is known as the *proxy icon* (*utsava vigraha*). It is smaller than the main icon and is usually constructed of an alloy of 5 metals (*pañca-loha*). During festivals the Spiritual Energy (*śakti*) from the main icon is transferred temporarily into the proxy icon which is then taken out in procession and receives particular services.

The icons for use in the home for daily worship are either pictures or metal images. Metal images, when used for worship should be about 14 cms high.

Classification of Icons

Agamic Icons fall into three broad groups they are;

citra	sculptured in the round.
citrārdha	base-relief
citrabhāsa	painted

Those that are sculptured in the round can be classified according to movability as;

cala	movable,
acala	immovable,
calācala	both movable and immovable.

They are also classified according to temperament;

śānta or saumya	those of a peaceful demeanor
raudra or ugra	those of a terrifying nature.

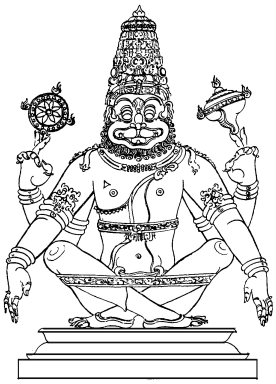
The immovable icons are known as dhruva-bera or mūla-vigraha and are the main deity of the temple, they are almost always sculptured out of either stone, or if very large (like in the temple of

Srirangam) they are molded out of plaster, and are classified by posture;—

sthānaka — standing, *āsina* — sitting, *śayana* — reclining

These *mula-beras* are further classified according to the purpose for which they are worshipped, different results being obtained from each type.

1. yoga mūrti; These icons depict the Supreme Being in various meditational postures. They are worshipped by the aspirant desiring self-mastery or Yoga (unification with God). These icons should be established and consecrated on the banks of rivers, in forests or on top of mountains, it should be quite far from human habitation, the reason being quite obviously in order to afford a peaceful and undisturbed environment in which the aspirant can practice yogic meditation.



2. bhoga-mūrti; These icons depict the Lord along with His consorts in a domestic situation. This is the best suited form for worship in temples constructed in towns and places of habitation. These icons are conducive of enjoyment and happiness and can be resorted to by all classes and by people of all temperaments. The images of Radha-Krishna and Lakshmi-Narayana are of this type

3. vīra-mūrti; These icons depict the Lord in a heroic posture such as Rama defeating Ravana. The eight-armed forms of Vishnu and Lakshmi are also considered as Vira-murtis.

This type of icon bestows achievement of ambitions and goals, power and victory over enemies (such as anger, greed, delusion etc.), it can be established either in the town or outside of it.

4. ugra-mūrti; This is the form which is used for protection against enemies (either real or spiritual in the form of anger, delusion, desire etc.). They are characterized by sharp teeth and a large number of arms carrying various weapons, wide eyes and a flaming halo around the head. This icon may only be set up in the North-eastern corner of the settlement or village. The setting up of an *Ugra-murti* in the midst of a town or city is prohibited. If it is established then a *santa-murti* must be placed directly in front of it, or a tank of water should be constructed in front of the temple. The Vishvarupa, Narasimha, Sudarsana and the Vata-patra-sayin are of the Ugra type.

5. abhicārika-mûrti; used for the purpose of inflicting death and destruction on one's enemies or confounding his purposes. This form is only set up far from a town and never in a place of human habitation. (This form is purely theoretical as there are no temples of this type and no Vaiṣṇava would have anything to do with them).

Orientation of Icons

The standing and seated icons are orientated either facing the east or the west. The *sayana bera* (reclining) can face any of the four cardinal points, if facing North then the head is to the East, if facing South-the head is to the West. If facing East or West then the head is to the South. Depending on the direction of the head of the Icon differing results are obtained;

East — *śāntidam* (peace)
South — *jayadam* (victory)
West — *puṣṭidam* (vigour)
North — *abhicārikam* (depredation)

The *Ugra-rupa* can only be established in the North-east of the settlement where it will give prosperity and happiness, the incorrect establishing of the *ugra-rupa* in a town or village leads to the following results;

In the East — destruction of village
In the south-east — destruction of the settlement
In the South — degradation of the womenfolk
In the South-west — population will be decreased through disease
In the west — bad conduct, depression and mental anguish
In the north-west — delinquency amongst the populace
In the north — various types of afflictions.

Narasimha — usually the yoga form — is always set up to the west of the main sanctorum, even in Siva temples.

Karma Bimbas.

A karma bimba is a *proxy* image of the main Icon which is used for a variety of practical purposes. The life force (*prāṇa*) from the main Icon is transferred into the karma bimba for a short duration for serving the particular purpose. Thereafter it is transferred back into the main Icon. In a temple consecrated according to the Agamas there should be three, five or six such karma-bimbas. Five are most common and are known as the **Pañca-bera.**

dhruvam tu grāma rakṣārtham arcan artham tu kautukam ।
snānārtham snapanam proktam balyartham baliberakam ।
utsava cotsavartham ca pañca-bera prakalpitāḥ ॥

1. dhruva- bera — the main icon in the sanctum sanctorum which is of the immovable kind, constructed of stone and permanently fixed. It protects the town
2. kautuka-bera — the movable image used for daily offerings .
3. snapana-bera — the icon used for the daily bathing ceremony.
4. bali-bera — icon used for the daily *bali* offerings in the courtyard of the temple.

5. utsava-bera — the icon which is taken out in procession on festivals.

6. śayana-bera — the icon used for putting to rest at night

Few temples are opulent enough to possess and to handle all these five beras so the general situation is to have two beras only; the **mula-bera** and the **utsava-bera**. The *utsava-bera* fulfills the function of all the other 4 types. These *karma-bimbas* have to correspond in certain iconical forms to the *dhruva-bera*. If the *dhruva-bera* stands they stand, if the *dhruva-bera* sits they sit, but if the *dhruva-bera* reclines then the *karma-bimbas* either stand or sit. They also have to correspond in the number of arms and various other paraphernalia.

karmārcā sarvathā kāryā mūla-bimba anusāriṇī | Viśvaksena Samhita 17; 11.
The karma-bimbas must correspond in every way to the mula-bimba.

Placement of the Pañca-Beras

The five karma *beras* have their specific places around the *Mula-bera* in the sanctum.

mūla berasya purataḥ utsavaṃ saṃniveśayet |
tat pūrvaṃ karma-beraṃ tu baliṃ dīpaṃ ca dakṣiṇe ||
tasya dakṣiṇa pārśve tu snapanaṃ sanniveśayet |
utsavasya ca vame tu tīrthaṃ śayanam eva vā ||

The Utsava-bimba should be kept in front of the Mula-bimba. The Karma-bimba (for daily offerings) should be kept in front of that. The Bali-bera should be kept along with the lamp and the Snapana-bera to the right. The Tirtha-bera and the Sayana-bera should be kept to the left of the Utsava-bera. (Aniruddha Samhita 15; 41-42.)

Construction of Icons

In the Agamas and Silpa Sastras (canons of architecture) there are *dhyana slokas* (visualizations) which are given; describing the exact features of the particular Deity and the paraphernalia in great detail for the purpose of meditation. It is according to these dhyana slokas that the icons are constructed.

Certain proportions having symbolic significance, are essential features of icons as well as of temple architecture. The image is made in strict conformity to the original canonical texts and concentration and visualization is extremely important. Any omission, error or oversight is attributed to imperfect concentration and slacking of attention, in this case the image is discarded and the process is deferred.

The Agamas insist on the necessity of making the icon as beautiful as possible but actually even an ill-shaped image made strictly according to the Agamic directions serves the same purpose as a very artistic and beautifully executed one.

The construction is always begun upon a date set according to astrology, being an auspicious day and in harmony with the nature of the deity. The Silpi or craftsman is expected to maintain his ritual purity during the process of construction and there are several disciplines which he has to undertake until the completion of the task.

Materials of Construction

kṛtvā pratinidhiṃ samyag dāru loha śilādibhiḥ |
tat sthāpayitvā māṃ sthāne śāstra dṛṣena vartmanā ||

Padma Samhita Kriya Pada 1;5

According to the Agamas, icons can be constructed of stone, wood, metal, clay, *kadi-sarkara* — a kind of mortar, precious stones or painted on cloth. Those made in metal are usually sculptured first in wax and then cast in metal.

Iconometry — Measurement of Icons

Dhruva Bera

The height of the *Dhruva-bera* varies. It is either taken in proportion to the temple super structure or the temple measurements are taken from the *dhruva-bera*.

Example 1

The whole Icon consists of three parts; 2 parts are the Icon proper and 1 part is the pedestal. Multiply the whole length of the Icon by 4 and divide by 8. One 8th is the width of the doorway into the sanctum.

Example 2

The whole length of the Icon including pedestal should be 7/ 8th of the height of the doorway. (i.e. height + 7 x 8 = doorway). If the Icon is made 2 meters in height then the following measurements are calculated;—

Doorway =	2 .28 mtrs high x 1.14 mtrs in width.
Sanctum =	4.57 mtrs square
Vimana =	9.14 mtrs high
Mandapa =	9.14 mtrs wide
Plinth =	3 mtrs high

Proportional measurement of Karma Bimbas

mūla-bimba samucchrāyāṃ dvidhā vāpi tridhāpi va |
caturdhā vā saṃvibhajya eka bhāgena kalpayet ||
utsavārcāṃ tad ucchrāyāṃ dvidhā vāpi tridhāpi vā |
caturdhā vā vibhajya eka bhāgena parikalpayet ||

īśvara Samhita 17; 242, 243.

The *karma-bimbas* should be either a quarter, a third or half of the height of the mula--bimba.

Nitya Sūris

Every image of Vishnu must be accompanied by the *Nitya Suris* which are the effulgent paraphernalia of the Lord. Each one possesses an aspect of the power of the Lord. Kashyapa points out that if they are absent then some negative reactions will take place, the reason would be due to neglect.

Goddesses	— yajamana will lose wife or children.
Munis (sages)	— loss of dharma.
Viśvaksena	— destruction of family.
Garuḍa	— increase of enemies.
cakra (Discus)	— life-span shortened.
śaṅkha (conch)	— insanity.
Dhvaja stambha (flag-pole)	— loss of status and prosperity
Yutheśa (rod)	— employees will be unfaithful

Position of the Deities in the Sanctum

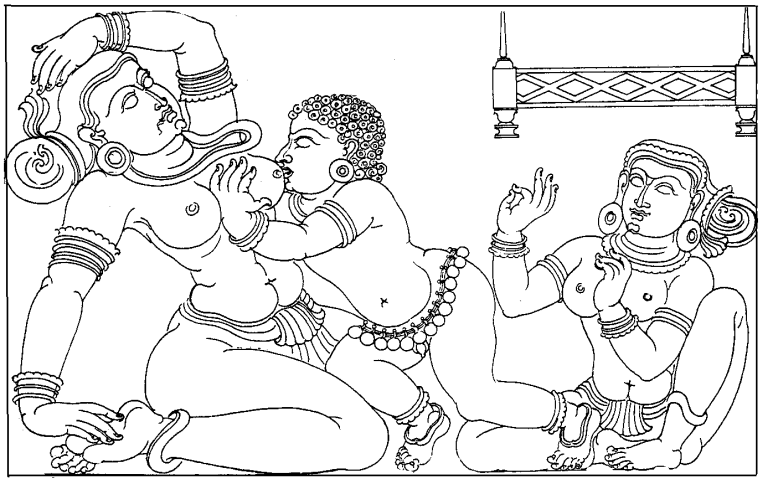
The sanctum sanctorum is called the *garbhalaya* and is divided into half. The half should again be sub-divided into 10 parts. The deities are established as follows;

Śiva Lingam in the 10th part i.e. in the centre.
Brahma is placed in the 9th part.
Viṣṇu is placed in the 8th part.
Śanmuga is placed in the 7th part.
Sarasvati in the 6th.
Sūrya in the 5th.
Ganeśa in the 4th.
Bhairava in the 3rd
śakti in the 2nd place from the rear wall.

Placement of the Vyūhas

In the placement of the Vyūha forms around the sanctum they are arranged as follows;

east;	vāsudeva	south;	sankarṣana
west;	pradyumna	north;	aniruddha



THEOLOGY OF THE PAÑCARĀTRA

The Absolute Reality in the Pancarātra is same Brahman revealed through the Upaṇiṣads and characterized by bliss and devoid of all negative qualities.

ānanda lakṣaṇam brahma, sarva heya vivarjitam (J.S. 4:60 & P.S. 1;5;29 40.)

All schools of Hindu theology are *pan-en-theistic* which affirms that the material universe (which is nothing but energy) is the physical body of the Godhead and it is also pervaded in the form of consciousness by that same divine nature. In other words — what we refer to as "God" (Brahman) is the totality of Being — a combination of both the physical universe as well as spiritual realm.

The word 'Brahman' used in the Upaṇiṣads is derived from the root *bṛh* which means 'to expand' or 'to grow' and as such indicates that Immensity which includes everything which is conceivable.

The Vedas declare — *sarvam khalvidam brahma* — 'all this is Brahman'.

This Immensity Brahman is beyond the comprehension of any being. Out of this transcendental Being there issues forth the first form of Godhead known as the Para-Vāsudeva in a subtle form with two arms, crystal in complexion and clad in yellow garments. This form is identified also as Nārāyaṇa (which means "the ground of all being").

In the Pañcarātra, Paramātman, Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu, Bhagavān and Vāsudeva are the various names by which Brahman the Supreme is known.

The term Bhagavān indicates the one who possesses *Bhaga* — the *ṣaḍguṇas*, or the group of six blessed qualities. They are *jñāna* (knowledge), *aiśvarya* (sovereignty), *śakti* (ability, potency), *bala* (strength), *vīrya* (virility, unaffectedness) and *tejas* (splendour).

The first phase of the manifestation of the universe is called "*Śuddha sṛṣṭi*" or "pure creation". The transition from absolute transcendence of the Godhead to physical manifestation begins with the Highest Brahman — Vāsudeva, whose nature consists of Existence (*sat*), Consciousness (*cit*) Bliss (*ānanda*), Eternality (*ananta*) and Impeccability (*amalam*).

It is during this phase that the six attributes of the Supreme Being make their appearance. These six attributes together form the "body" of the Supreme Being who gets the name vāsudeva thereby.

1. The ṣaḍ guṇas. The Six Incommunicable Attributes.

1. *jñānam* (Knowledge, omniscience) this is the essential attribute of the Supreme Being.
2. *aiśvarya* (sovereignty) Iccha shakti this attribute can be described as activity based upon total independence, or unimpeded activity.
3. *Śakti* (Energy) this is the potency or the ability to become the material cause of the universe as well as the efficient cause. This guṇa is also defined as the "accomplishing of the non accomplished" i.e. the ability to produce something, the cause of which can not be accounted for by empirical methods.
4. *bala* (Strength) this is omnipotence; defined as the total absence of fatigue, and the power to manifest and sustain all things.
5. *vīrya* (Creative Potency) defined as immutability unaffectedness or changelessness in spite of being the material cause of the universe the Lord is in no way changed or effected by this.
6. *tejas* (Splendour) absolute sovereignity, defined as the power to defeat all others and Total self sufficiency the Lord is complete in Himself and needs nothing outside of Himself.

In their totality these six qualities form the "body" of the Highest Being — God Vāsudeva and His consort Lakṣmī. (*ṣaḍ guṇa vigraham devam*).

The Pancarātra teaches a chain of other emanations proceeding from these six qualities, each one originating from the one before, just as one flame proceeds from another flame.

The primary emanations are known as *Vyūhas* which means the "splitting" of the six qualities into three pairs. This does not mean that each emanation has only two qualities; each emanation is Viṣṇu himself together with all the six qualities, of which only two become outwardly manifest and the other four remain dormant.

2. Description of the Vyūhas

1. **Saṅkarṣaṇa** — with this vyūha the "non pure" creation becomes dimly manifest like an embryo without internal distinctions. The guṇa concerned is **bala**, (omnipotence). Balarama is connected with this aspect, also described as ""Aśeṣa", "bhuvana ādhāra" (the support of the universe Ananta Śeṣa).

2. **Pradyumna** — with this Vyūha the duality of Spirit (*Puruṣa*) and Matter (*Prakrti*) makes its appearance, by means of the **aiśvarya** (absolute independence) guṇa.

3. **Aniruddha** — this Vyūha by means of the **Śakti** (ability to become the material universe) guṇa, causes the evolution of the atoms of Manifest matter and of gross Time out of the earlier "Primordial matter" and "Subtle Time". This allows the evolution of the "Matter" and "Spirit" resulting in the "mixed creation" (*miśra sṛṣṭi*) of the jīvātmans. Aniruddha becomes the ruler of the Cosmic Eggs (brahmāṇḍas) and their contents.

3. Sub-emanations of the Vyūhas.

From each of the 4 Vyūhas three sub-Vyūhas emanate called *vyuhāntaras*. These entities have the function of presiding over the divisions of Gross Time as the Lords of the months through the medium of the Sun in the 12 signs of the Zodiac.

Vyūha	Vyuhāntaras		
1. Vāsudeva	⇨ 2 Keśava	⇨ 2 Nārāyaṇa	⇨ 2 Mādhava.
2. Saṅkarṣaṇa	⇨ 2 Govinda	⇨ 2 Viṣṇu	⇨ 2 Madhusudana
3. Pradyumna	⇨ 2 Trivikrama	⇨ 2 Vāmana	⇨ 2 Śrīdhara.
4. Aniruddha	⇨ 2 Hṛṣīkeśa	⇨ 2 Padmanābha	⇨ 2 Damodara.

In addition to the above 12 manifestations there arise another set of 12 emanations called the vidyeśvaras the Lords of wisdom, these are;

Vyūha	Vidyeśvaras		
1.Vāsudeva	⇨ Vāsudeva II	⇨ 2 Puruṣottama	⇨ 2 Janārdana
2. Saṅkarṣaṇa	⇨ 2 Saṅkarṣaṇa II	⇨ 2 Adhokṣaja	⇨ 2 Upendra
3. Pradyumna	⇨ 2 Padyumna II	⇨ 2 Nṛsiṃha	⇨ 2 Hari
4. Aniruddha	⇨ 2 Aniruddha II	⇨ 2 Acyuta	⇨ 2 Kṛṣṇa

Altogether these manifestations are known as the *caturvimśati murtayaḥ* — The 24 manifestations.

4. Vibhavas & Avatāras - Manifestations and Incarnations

To the "Pure creation" belong the Vibhavas and Avatāras of God. There is a distinction between the primary (*mukhya*) and secondary (*gauṇa/āveśa*) incarnations. The primary Avatāras are Viṣṇu Himself with a transcendental body, while the secondary Avatāras are souls in bondage with a natural physical body which is possessed or pervaded by the Lord for fulfilling some purpose or particular mission. e.g. Vyāsa, Arjuna, Paraśurāma, Buddha etc.

The Viśvaksena Samhita declares that all the Vibhavas (Manifestations) originate directly or indirectly from Aniruddha.

5. Arca - Iconic Manifestation.

When a stone image (bera) is fashioned according to the principles laid down in the Agama, and is consecrated according to the rules and rites, then the Supreme Being by dint of His omnipotence and Omnipresence is capable of descending into such an icon with a tiny ray of His Potency (Śakti) in a subtle body known as a "*divya maṅgala vigraha*". This is technically known as the Arca Avatāra or Iconical descent in which the Lord manifests Himself out of compassion for the embodied beings in order to bestow His blessings upon them and to receive their offerings.

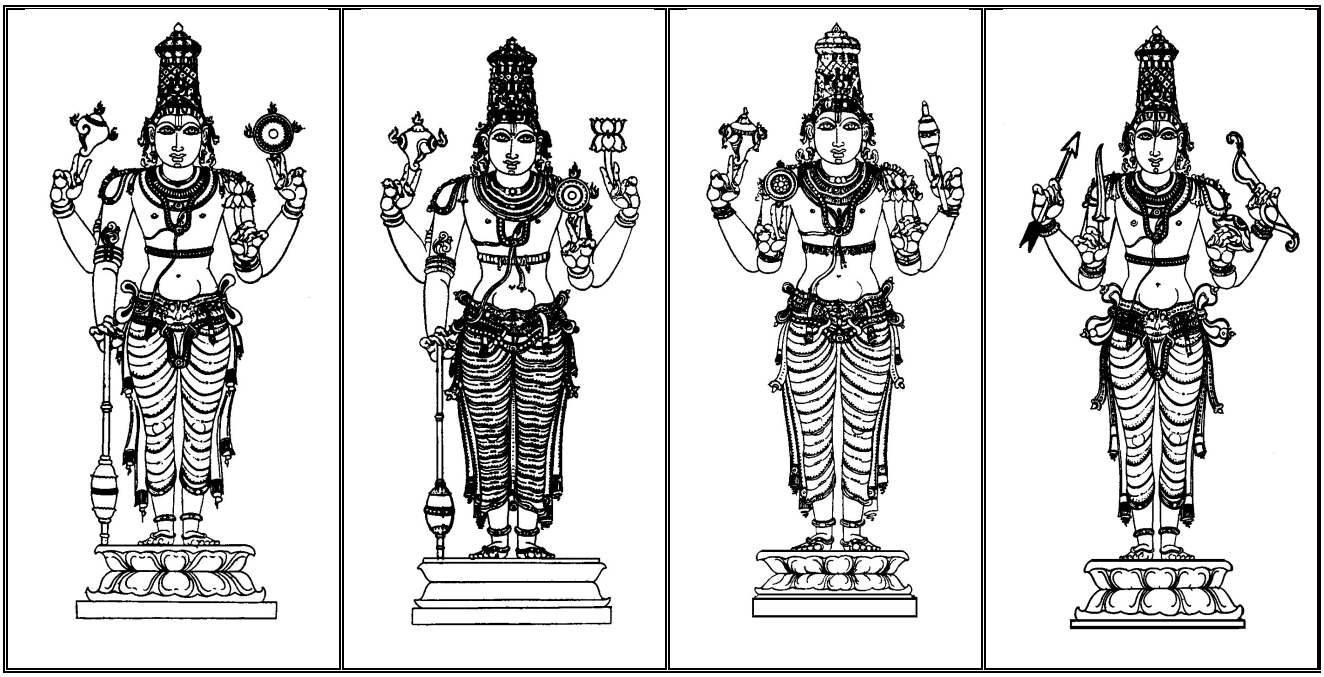
These Icons are said to be of three types;

1. *Svayam vyakta* — Self manifested; uncreated by human hands.
2. *Purva sthāpita* — Those established and worshipped many years ago by great sages and gods.
3. *Pratiṣṭhita* — And those presently established by wealthy Beings.

Chart of the Vyūha Correspondances

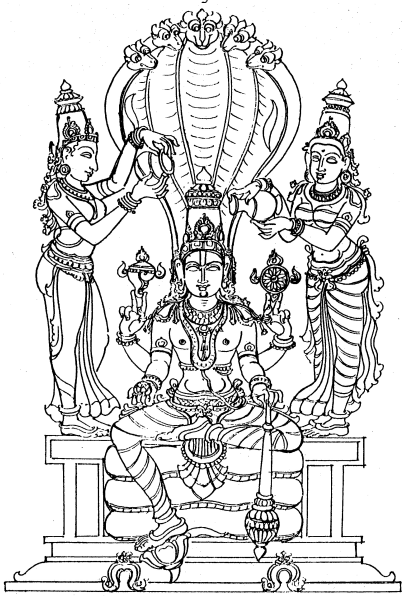
	Vāsudeva	Sankarṣaṇa
Objective	**Brahman** — the Absolute Godhead.	**Iśvara** — the Supreme God
Subjective	The Supreme Self	The cognizer of the unmanifested, latent objectivity.
Qualities — Guṇas	All six	Jñāna/bala (wisdom/power)
Phases of manifestation	**Viśrānti** — latent	**Udaya** — emerging
States of consciousness	**Turīya** transcendence	**Suṣupti /**Prajña Deep sleep/conceptual
Antaraṅga - Yoga	Samādhi	Dhyāna
Cognition	wisdom (*jñana*).	mind (*āśaya*)
Sonic	**Para** - transcendental	**Pasyanti** – mental visualization
Elements	Vāyu-tattva (air)	Tejas-tattva (fire)

	Pradyumna	Aniruddha
Objective	**Hiraṇya-garbha** — the World-self. The collection of jīvas.	**Virāj** — the manifested cosmos.
Subjective	The experiencer of the subtle levels of possibility.	The experiencer of gross things
Qualities — Guṇas	Aiśvarya/vīrya (perfection/virility)	śakti/tejas (energy/brilliance)
Phases of manifestation	**Vyāpti** — pervading	**Vyakti** — individuation
States of consciousness	**Svapna /**Taijasa Dreaming/imaginative	**Jāgrata /**Viśva Waking/perceptual
Antaraṅga - Yoga	Dhāraṇa	Pratyahāra
Cognition	senses (*indriya*),	external objects (*artha*),
Sonic	**Madhyama** – internally audible	**Vaikhari** – articulated sound.
Elements	Apa-tattva (water)	Bhu-tattva (Earth)

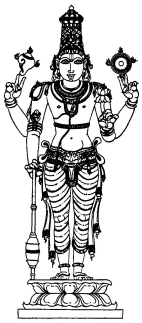


Vasudeva Saṅkarṣana Pradyumna Aniruddha

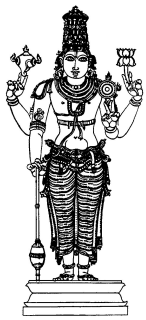
Nārāyana



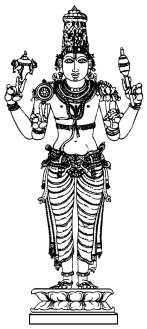
Para Vāsudeva/Vaikuṇṭha Nātha with Srī-devī and Bhū-devī



Vāsudeva



Sankarṣaṇa



Pradyuma

Aniruddha

vyūhāntaras. These sub-emanations of the primary vyūhas have the function of presiding over the divisions of Gross Time as the Lords of the months through the medium of the Sun traversing through the 12 signs of the Zodiac.

Keśava	Govinda	Trivikrama	Hṛṣīkeśa
Nārāyaṇa*	Viṣṇu*	Vāmana	Padmanābha
Mādhava	Madhusūdana	Śrīdhara	Dāmodara

In addition to the above 12 manifestations there arise another set of 12 emanations called the **vidyeśvaras** the Lords of wisdom,

Vāsudeva II	Saṅkarṣaṇa II	Pradyumna II	Aniruddha II
Puruṣottama	Adhokṣaja	Nṛsiṃha	Acyuta
janārdana	Upendra	Hari	Kṛṣṇa

* These are sub-emanations although known by the same names as the Supreme Being.

VISHNU TATTVA

Understanding Vaiṣṇava Iconography

Icons & Symbology

The language of symbols develops when an attempt is made to represent something that is beyond the normal capacity of the human mind to understand. A transcendent reality is expressed in terms of equivalents known as symbols. All of human interaction is carried out through the use of symbols. To represent a group in terms of quantity we use symbols called numbers. To represent ideas in terms of sound we use symbols known as words. To transmit words to others in a graphic manner we use the symbology of letters of the alphabet. A symbol can be natural or conventional. When we perceive a direct relationship between one order of things with another a natural symbol develops. In the Agamic cosmology symbolism is the expression of reality. It is the expression of the particular points where two worlds meet. The meeting points of the transcendental world with the material universe. The material world is a reflection of the transcendental world and therefore true symbolism springs from nature and is not invented by mankind. However far back we reach in Indian thought as a whole we find a coherent use of symbols to represent abstractions. The whole of Indian iconography is built up upon a code of symbols based on the assumption that there exists a natural affinity between ideas and forms. This code of symbols has come down from time out of mind, its origins are lost in the remote ages of prehistoric man. Symbols do not speak to the rational mind and cannot be fully understood by logic, they are the subject of inner experience and spiritual realization. Symbols are the inner language of the unconscious mind.

In this Spiritual Realm (*Parama Vyoman*) God resides in the form of Paravāsudeva. He is adorned with the nine chief ornaments and weapons which represent the various cosmic principles of the universe.

1. *kaustubha* (chest jewel) — jivas
2. *śrīvatsa* — prakṛti
3. *gadā* (mace) — mahat (cosmic intelligence).
4. *śaṅkha* (conch) — sāttvic ahaṃkāra
5. *śārṅga* (bow) — tamasic ahaṃkāra - the mind
6. *khaḍga* (sword) — knowledge
7. *cakra* (discus) — universal mind
8. *bāṇa* (arrows) — five senses
9. *vanamāla* (garland) — elements

These weapons and ornaments are not regarded as mere symbols but are actually connected with the principles which they represent as the presiding deities. The great authority on this is the *astra bhūṣana adhyaya* of the Vishnu Purana .

The ultimate Reality in the Pancarātra doctrines is Brahman characterised by bliss and devoid of all negative qualities.

"ānanda lakṣaṇam brahma, sarva heya vivarjitam"

(J.S. 4:60 & P.S. 1;5;29 40.)

The word *Brahman* is derived from the root *bṛh* which means "to expand" or "to grow" and as such indicates the "immensity" which denotes all the manifestations of God in the Transcendental as well as the functional aspects.

This Immensity is beyond comprehension and expression, out of this transcendental Being there issues forth the first form of God known as the Para-Vasudeva in a subtle form with two arms, crystal in complexion and clad in yellow garments. This is identified also as Nārāyaṇa. The Pancarātra does not support the theory of "two Brahmans" of Advaita Vedanta, where the Unmanifest *nirguṇa* Brahman is superior to the Manifest *saguṇa* Brahman; the latter being enveloped and conditioned by Avidya (nescience)!

Everything connected with the icon has a symbolic meaning; the posture, gestures, ornaments, number of arms, weapons, vehicle, consorts and associate deities (*parivara devata*). These descriptions and interpretations are found in the Śrīmad Bhagavatam (S.B.), Vishnu Purana (V.P.), Gopala-uttara-tapini Upanishad (G.U.T.Up), Krsna Upanishad (K.U.) Agamas as well as in the Brahmanas and Aranyakas.

itthaṃ pumān pradhānañca buddhyahaṃkāram eva ca |
bhūtāni ca hṛṣikeśe manaḥ sarvendriyāṇi ca |
vidyāvidye ca maitreya sarvametat samāśritam ||
astra bhūṣaṇa saṃsthāna svarūpaṃ rūpa-varjitaḥ |
bibhartti māyārūpo 'sau śreyasi prāṇināṃ hariḥ ||

In this manner Self, nature, intellect, egotism, the elements, the senses, mind, ignorance, and wisdom are all assembled in the person of Krsna. Hari in a mystical form, embodies the shapeless elements of the universe as his weapons and ornaments, for the salvation of humankind. V.P. 1;22

tāntrikāḥ paricaryāyāṃ kevalasya śriyaḥpateḥ |
aṅgopāṅgāyudhākalpaṃ kalpayanti ca yaiḥ ||

The Tantrik masters for the purpose of contemplation have given physical features, weapons and paraphernalia to the One Supreme Lord the consort of Śrī. (Śrīmad Bhagavatam 12;11;2)

1. Kṣīra-sāgara — Ocean of Milk:

This symbolizes the state of undifferentiated unity of *prakriti* (primordial matter) prior to creation of the universe. From liquid milk solid butter is churned — from the undifferentiated Prakriti differentiated solid matter arises. The *kṣīra-sāgara* stands for the pure unadulterated state when the three *gunas* [the three cosmic forces; (*rajas*) centrifugal force — expansion, (*tamas*) centripetal force — contraction and (*sattva*) centralizing or harmonizing force] exist in perfect harmony and balance. When this balance is disturbed then the competing forces give rise to the creation of matter in it's five states – solid (earth), liquid (water), gaseous (air), heat (fire) and expansion (space).

It also represents the consciousness, in the myth dealing with the churning of the ocean of milk we have the symbol of churning the mind through devotion in order to produce the essence (butter) in the form of God Consciousness. During this process the 14 jewels are extracted. The ocean is also symbolic of the space or ether or infinity, and Vishnu is identified with the sun whose function of creation, preservation and destruction in our solar system is identical to that of the Supreme Lord in the entire universe.

2. Ananta Śeṣa:

Ananta shesha is the name of the serpent with a thousand heads upon which Vishnu reclines. The serpent in non-different from Vishnu Himself. The word *ananta* means the endless or infinite, and *shesha* means the 'remnant' or 'residue'. When creation is withdrawn it cannot entirely cease to be, there must remain a germ in subtle form of all that has been and will be so that the world can be re-projected when the time comes. It is this remainder of the universe that is embodied by *Ananta śeṣa* floating upon the limitless ocean of the causal waters and forming the couch upon which Vishnu rests. Another meaning of the term *śeṣa* is 'servant' or Subordinate and the master is known as *śeṣi* or the Principle.

3. The Blue Colour;

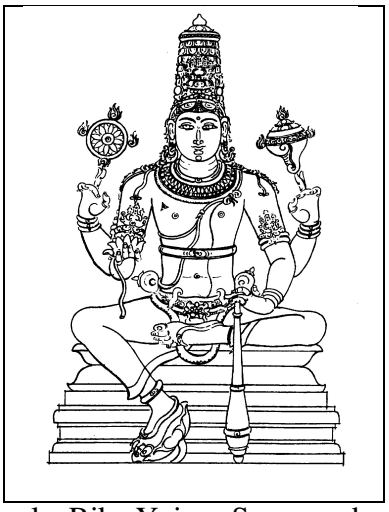
Vishnu is always represented as being dark blue or black in colour. Darkness is the colour of the limitless and all-pervading ether. The very name Vishnu means 'the all-pervader' and so the colour reinforces this idea of the Infinite, Beyond limitation and the basis of all spatial manifestation.

Black is in fact not a colour it is the sum total of all colours. So too Lord Vishnu is the sum total of the entire cosmos and all its particles. Though Vishnu Himself is depicted as black, the avataras (incarnations) appear in different ages in different colors according to the predominant quality (*guna*) of that age. In the Golden age in which the cohesive-tendency (*sattva*) predominates, the Lord appears in a white form. In the second age in which the expansive-tendency (*rajas*) predominates, he appears as red in colour, in the third age in which there is a mixture of *rajas* and *tamas*, His colour is yellow and in the age of kali in which the disintegrating-tendency (*tamas*) prevails, his colour is black. (Brahma Purana 246).

4. The Four Arms:

sattvam rajastama iti ahamkaras caturbhujaḥ G.u.t.Up. 55

The four arms represent the three fundamental qualities (gunas) and the notion of individuality (ahamkara) [from which all existence arises].



Four is the number of the earth, and represents the fulfilment of manifestations in all the spheres of existence. Thus they represent all the following;

a. The cardinal directions; indicating that the Lord is all pervading and has perfect dominion over all the directions.

b. The *Yajña kuṇḍa* (fire pit); the Lord is known as Yajña Purusha, he is the sole enjoyer of the sacrifices as well as being the sacrifice itself, and as such his arms represent the four Vedic kuṇḍas (*gārhapatya, āhavaniya, avasathya, sabhya*).

c. The four Vedas which are the sacred Revelation namely Rik, Yajus, Sama and Atharvana.

d. The four divisions of society; intellectuals, administrators, entrepreneurs, and workers.

e. The four stages of life; student, householder, retirement and renunciate.

f. The four levels of consciousness; waking (*jāgrata*), dream (*svapna*), sub-consciousness (*suṣupti*) and transcendental consciousness (*turiya*).

g. The four types of devotees; distressed, inquirer, the opportunist and the sage.

h. The four functional manifestations (vyuhas). Vasudeva, Aniruddha, Pradyumna, Sankarshana.

i. The four essential components of dharma; truth (*satya*), austerity (*tapa*), compassion (*dayā*), and charity (*Dāna*).

j. The four aims of human endeavor (*purushārthas*); pleasure (kāma), prosperity (*artha*), righteousness (*dharma*) and liberation (*mokṣa*).

k. The four types of liberation (*mukti*), communion (*sāyujya*), association (*sārūpya*), contiguity (*sāmīpya*), collocation (*sālokya*).

l. The four ages of man. (yugas) *Satya, Treta, Dvapara, Kali.*

m. four types of birth — gods (*deva*), humans (*manushya*), animals (*tiryak*) and plants (*sthāvaram*).

n. The four types of Spiritual Paths or Yogas:— jñāna, karma, bhakti and śaranāgati

o. The four types of differentiation among all existing things — genus (*jāti*), form (*rūpa*), nature (*svabhāva*) and knowledge (*jñāna*).

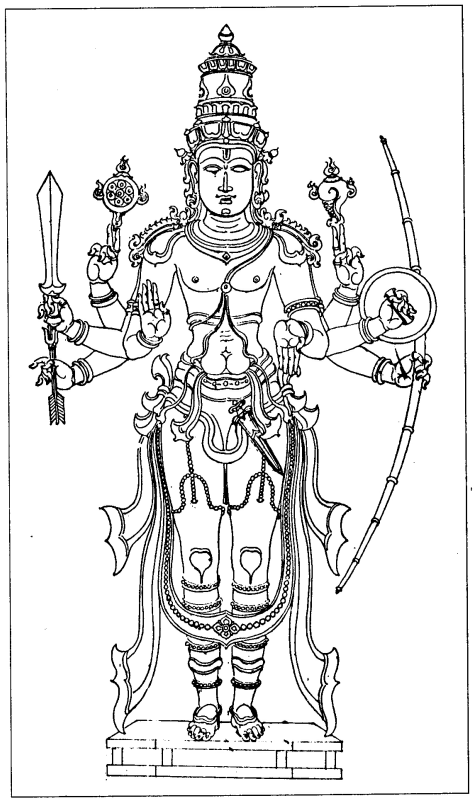
p. The four qualities of all manifested beings category (*jāti*), attributes (*guna*), function (*kriya*), relationship (*sambandha*).

5. The Eight Arms;

Some icons of the Lord or His manifestations are depicted as having 8 arms. This also represents the complete dominion over all the directions, as well as the eight preserving powers (shakti) of the Lord which are;

1. health (*ārogya*),
2. knowledge (*jñāna*),
3. wealth (*dhana*),
4. organization (*sampādanam*),
5. cooperation (*sahodyoga*),
6. fame (*kīrti*),
7. courage (*dhrti*),
8. truth (*satyam*).

They also symbolize the 8 attributes of the Supreme Being which are;



1. *sarva-jñatva*	omniscience of universe, living entities and deeds. (loka, jiva & karma)
2. *sarveśvaratva*	Supreme Lordship and Dominion over the entire creation.
3. *sarva-antaryāmitva*	inner rulership and control of all entities.
4. *sarva-karaṇatva*	Supreme Cause of all causes.
5. *sarva-niyantṛitva*	Supreme controller of everything.
6. *sarva-kartṛitva*	the original Performer of all actions.
7. *sarva-śaktimatva*	omnipotence
8. *sva-tantratva*	complete and absolute independence.

THE WEAPONS

6. The Conch (śaṅkha)

The conch represents the first manifestation of articulate language — AUM— *nāda brahman*. This monosyllable contains within itself all language and meaning in a potential state. It is the seed from which speech developed — the nutshell containing the whole of knowledge and wisdom.

All matter is light and vibration. All the forms of the universe are effects of the primeval sonic vibration. Thus the conch is the symbol of the origin of existence.

Its shape is a spiral, starting at one point and evolving into ever increasing spheres. It comes from water, the first compact element. When blown it produces the sound AUM.

The conch is named **pañcajanya** which means 'born-of-five' and it is the representation of the pure-notion-of-individuality, (*sattvika ahamkara*), from which are evolved the principles of the five elements. (Padma Purana 4;79;222). According to the Vedic account of creation, in the beginning Brahman (the Supreme Being) alone existed then a desire arose to create the first ego-sense arose within Him, and from this primeval ego-sense gradually the process of creation was set into motion.

During war in ancient India the conch was blown to signal the commencement of the battle, it was also blown by the victorious parties to announce their victory. The Lord's blowing of the conch therefore indicates that He is always ready to do battle with the forces of evil and for the protection of the devotees.

7. The Discus (cakra)

bala svarūpam atyanta javenāntaritānilam ।
cakra svarūpañca mano dhatte viṣṇuḥ kare sthitam ॥

In the form of mighty power, revolving swifter than the winds—the Universal Mind in the form of a wheel is held in the hand of Vishnu. (V.P. 1;22; 70.)

The Cosmic Mind has the unlimited power which creates and destroys all spheres of existence (*lokas*) and forms of the universe, the nature of which is to revolve. According to the Ahirbudhnya Samhita 2;26, the Discus represents the "will-to-multiply". In the beginning the Lord said to Himself *eko'ham bahu syam* — "I am one, may I become many". And thus He projected the manifold universe that we see around us. There is only one center to the wheel but it is said to have a thousand spokes (*sahasrāra*).

The Discus is called **sudarśana** which means 'pleasing-to-see', it is usually shown in iconography with a hexagon in the center.

The six points of the two triangles represent the six seasons in a yearly time cycle, in the center nave is the seed sound (bija) 'hrim', which represents the changeless, motionless center, the Supreme Cause.

The interlocking triangles symbolise the union of the male and female elements of the Universe (puruṣa = prakṛti)

The Wheel has eight spokes and 8 wings, which represent the eight syllables of the sacred Aṣṭākṣarī mantra, while the outer circle of the wheel represents 'māya', the divine power of manifestation.

athāṣṭāram-aṣṭapatraṃ cakraṃ bhavatyaṣṭākṣarā vai gāyatrī gāyatryā saṃmitaṃ bhavati barhir-māyayā veṣṭitaṃ bhavati kṣetraṃ kṣetraṃ vai māyaiṣā saṃpadyate ॥ (N-p-t-Up 5;2.)

In the microcosm the Universal Mind corresponds to the active-notion-of-individual-existence (rajas ahamkara) that is associated with the fiery principle. "The prodigious power of the mind can destroy all forms of ignorance, hence the discus is the fearful weapon which cuts off the heads of all the demons of error ". (Śrī Vishnu tattva sidhanta 5;19 44-45).

8. The Lotus (Padma)

aṣṭadikpālakair-bhūmi padmaṃ vikasitaṃ jagat ।
saṃsārārṇava saṃjātaṃ sevitaṃ mama mānase ॥

From the Ocean of Creation rises the Universe which appears in My Mind: the regents of the eight directions are its eight opened petals. (G.u.t.Up 51)

The lotus represents the manifested universe, the flower that unfolds in all its glory from the formless and infinite waters of causality.

The pure and unsullied lotus arising from the depth of the waters and far from the shore is associated with the idea of purity and with sattva which arises from the law-of-conduct (dharma) and knowledge (*jñāna*). The Lotus is also symbolic of the enlightened mind. It rises in the mud of material existence gradually growing through the waters until it reaches the surface and then opens up to the sun in all its glory. Water splashed upon a lotus leaf never remains but immediately slips off. In the same way the dirt of worldliness never stain the enlightened being.

9. The Mace (gadā)

buddhirapyāste gadārūpeṇa mādhave ॥

The mace which Krsna wields is the Intellect. (V.P. 1;22;68.)

The mace is the form of strength or power and the intellect is the highest power, by the power of mind one person can control thousands. The mace is thus the symbol of the intellect (buddhi) or the power of knowledge

It is called **kaumodaki** which means the-stupifier-of-the-mind. The power of knowledge is the essence-of-life (*prāṇa tattva*) from which all physical and mental powers come. Nothing else can conquer time and itself become the power of time.

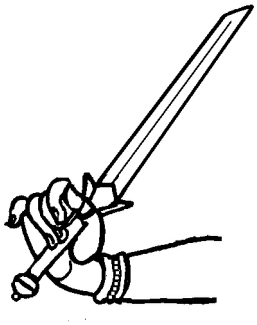
gadā ca kālikā sākṣāt sarvaśatrunibarhiṇī ।

The mace is Kali, the power of time, and it destroys everything that opposes it. (K.U. 23)

The mace can also be interpreted as representing the Law of Karma and the *nigraha śakti* — the power of justice of the Divine.

10. The Sword & Scabbard (khaḍga)

bibhartti yaccāsiratnam acyuto 'tyanta nirmalam ।
vidyomayantu tajjñānam avidyākośa saṃsthitam ॥



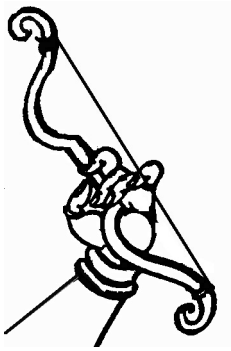
The sword which Śrī Krsna possess is the sword of Immaculate Wisdom, The sheath in which it is kept is the sheath of Ignorance. (V.P. 1;22;73.)

The sword represents Pure Knowledge (*jnāna*) whose substance is wisdom (*vidya*) — It is called **nandaka** which means the 'source-of-joy.' This flaming sword is the powerful weapon which destroys ignorance. The sheath represents nescience (*avidya*) which is the fundamental problem of human existence — ignorance not of data and science but of who we really are in essence — pure conscious entities (*jīvas*) having a human experience.

11. Bow & Arrows (cāpa-śara)

bhūtādim indriyādiñca dvidhāhaṃkāram īśvaraḥ ।
bibhartti śaṅkha-rūpeṇa śārṅga rūpeṇa ca sthitam ॥

The Lord supports ahaṅkāra (notion of individuality) in its twofold division — into the material elements and the indriyas (5 organs of knowledge and 5 organs of action) as the emblems of His conch and bow. (V.P. 1;22;69.)



The bow is the destructive aspect of the-notion-of-individuality (*tāmasa ahaṃkāra*). This aspect is associated in the creation of the world with the disintegrating tendency and with the origin of the *indriyas* (sensory and motor faculties) and their fields of activity in the material world.

yānīndriyāṇyaśeṣāṇi buddhi-karmātmakāni vai ।
śara-rūpāṇyaśeṣāṇi tāni dhatte janārdanaḥ ॥

Janardana bears in his numerous shafts the manifold faculties of both action and perception. (V.P. 1;22;72.)

This activity of engaging in sense gratification is symbolized by the arrows, held within the quiver which is the storehouse of actions. The arrows are then shot at objects within the field of our daily experience.

On the path to enlightenment the bow represents the psychological foundation from which spiritual unfoldment takes place. The arrow of the mind is aimed at its target which is the

Supreme Lord, and then with skilful means of spiritual techniques it is released to fly to its ultimate goal, never to return.

THE ORNAMENTS

12. Kaustubha — Chest Jewel:

Upon the chest of Lord Vishnu there is a priceless gem called **kaustubha** which means treasure-of-the-ocean.

yena sūryāgni vāk candra tejasā svasvarūpiṇā |
vartate kaustubhākhyaṃ taṃ pravadantīśamāninaḥ ||

That by which the Sun, fire, speech and moon shine in their particular forms
That is the form of consciousness known as the gem Kaustubha. (G.u.t.Up 54.)

ātmānamasya jagato nirlepamaguṇāmalam |
bibhartti kaustubhamaṇi svarūpaṃ bhagavān hariḥ ||

The Glorious Hari wears the pure soul of the world, immaculate and free of negative qualities as the Kaustubha gem. (V.P. 1;22;67.)

kaustubha avyapadeśena svātmajyotir bibharyajaḥ |

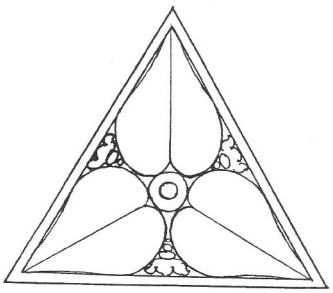
What He wears as the jewel Kaustubha is the pure Jiva-consciousness. (S.B. 12.11.10)

This total consciousness which is the "World-Soul" known in Vedānta as *hiraṇyagarbha* (golden matrix) pure, subtle and unstained is the chest-jewel named Kaustubha. This gem is comprised of the totality of the consciousness of all living beings, born from the causal ocean, and it is the enjoyer of material creation.

13. Srīvatsa

śrīvatsa samsthāna dharamanante ca samāśritam pradhānaṃ |

The First Principle of Manifestation (pradhāna) is seated on the Eternal, as the Śrīvatsa mark. (V.P. 1:22;69)



On Vishnu's chest there is a small spiral mark (sometimes a small triangle) called Śrīvatsa which means beloved-of-Fortune (Laksmi).

This represents Primordial Nature (*prakrti*) — the First Principle of Manifestation or the material energy which is the source of the natural world. This is the symbol of all that is enjoyed; the multifold beings and forms of the manifested world. The three leaves represent the three *gunas* or qualities of matter — active (*rajas*), passive (*tamas*) or balanced (*sattva*).

14. Vaijayanti-mala — Necklace

pañca-rūpā tu yā mālā vaijayantī gadābhṛtaḥ |
sā bhūta hetu saṃghāto bhūtamālā ca vai dvija ||

The necklace of the lord called Vaijayanti comprised of five precious gems, (pearl, ruby, emerald, sapphire and diamond) is the aggregate of the five elemental spheres. (V.P. 1;22;72.)

The garland made of five types of forest flowers (or five jewels) is called the **vaijyanti mala** the garland-of-victory. It symbolizes the five spheres of the senses, the display of manifestation which surrounds the Supreme Being.

15. Pitāmbara — The Yellow Robe

vāsaścandamayam pītam

The yellow robe represents the metres of the Vedas. (S.B. 12.11.11)

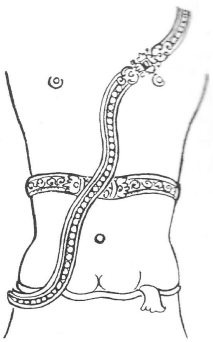
Yellow which is the colour of the fire represents **yajña** or Sacrifice which is the principle activity taught in the Vedas. The Lord is known as **yajña-purusha** the One who receives all the oblations offered into the sacred fire. The act of creation is depicted in the Vedas as a cosmic sacrifice in which the Supreme Person Himself becomes the victim, and it is from this primeval sacrifice that the cosmos has its origins.

The yellow robe symbolizes fire and the principle of sacrifice which underlies all human transactions with the environment and with other beings. In order to receive we must give, obtaining one thing also requires letting go of another. This ethically managed reciprocity is the foundation of Dharma practice.

16. Yajñopavitam — Sacred Thread

brahma-sūtram trivṛt svaram

The sacred thread (yajñopavitam) symbolizes the syllable AUM, by its three strands. (S.B. 12.11.;2).



All initiated members of the 3 twice-born castes wear the sacred thread draped over the left shoulder and falling upon the right hip. It indicates that the one who wears it is committed to the control of body, speech and mind.

17. Earrings, Armlets & Crown

bibharti sāṃkhyaṃ yogaṃ ca devo makara kuṇḍale |

The earrings shaped like sea-monsters (makara) of the Lord represent the two methods of knowledge;—intellectual knowledge (sankhya) and intuitive perception (yoga). (S.B. 12.11.12)

dharma artha kāma keyūrair divya divya mayīritaiḥ |

The armlets represent the aims of worldly life; pleasure, success, righteousness and liberation. (G.u.t.Up 57)

kūṭasthaṃ sattvarūpaṃ ca kirīṭaṃ pravadanti mām |

The crown is said to be the Unknowable Reality. (G.u.t.Up 59.)

18. The Whisk, Fan, Flag & Parasol

jayantī saṃbhavo vāyuścāmaro dharma saṃjñitaḥ ||

The fly-whisk of Vishnu is the Eternal-law (sanātana dharma), the life-breath of the universe which arises at the first moment of manifestation. (Krsna Upanisad 20).

The fly whisk is made from the tail of a yak and when the herd is on the move they follow each other — so the tail of the leader represents the following of Dharma

dharmaṃ yaśaśca bhagavaṃścāmara vyajane'bhajat | (S.B. 12.11.19)

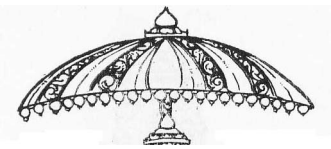
The two ceremonial whisks held on either side represent Dharma and Glory.

Cāmaras or fly-whisks are the symbol of royalty in Hindu society and are only used by members of the high estate.

candra sūryatviṣo divyā dhvajā merur-hiraṇmayaḥ |
ātapatraṃ brahmalokamathordhvaṃ caraṇaṃ smṛtam ||

The fan is the ritual-sacrifice (yajña), and the flag is the glory of the sun and the moon. The axis of the world (Meru) is the pole of the parasol which represents the transcendental realm " (G.u.t.Up 52.)

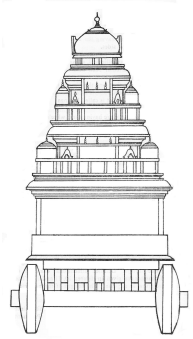
The parasol which is the emblem of Sovereignty, carried over the heads of Kings and high dignitaries on festive occasions represents the Supreme Abode of Vishnu; Land-of-no-hindrance (*Vaikunta*), the place where there is no fear.



19. The Chariot

akūtirasya syandanam (S.B. 12.11.16)

The chariot represents the body with all its powers of action, drawn by the horses of the senses and directed by the mind as charioteer. The Self is the rider. From it one shoots the arrows of the senses at their respective objects.



Every Agamic temple has a temple chariot and every year during the annual Brahmotsava which last for 10 days, the utsava mūrti (proxy images) are taken out for a ride in the chariot.

THE ATTENDANTS

20. Garuḍa

trivṛd vedaḥ suparṇākhyo yajñaṃ vahati pūruṣam ||

The Lord who is the embodiment of Sacrifice (yajñam) is borne by Garuda who is an embodiment of the three Vedas. (S.B. 12.11.20)

Lord Visnu's vehicle is Garuda which means 'Wings-of-speech,' in the Vedas he is also known as Garutman. He represents the Vedas which carry the Lord of Sacrifices. Garuda is the mantras of the Veda which travel with the speed of light from one world to another.

Garuda is also taken as the personification of courage (Satapatha Brahmana 6;7;2;6.)

According to the Puranas, Garuda is the son of **Kaśyapa** (vision) and **Vinata** (She-before-whom-knowledge-bows). Vinata quarrelled with her co-wife **Kadru** (chalice-of-immortality) who was the mother of the ever-moving ones — the serpents which are the symbols of the cycles of time. (They also symbolise anger and hostility which are the strongest factors which obstruct the spiritual journey.) From this quarrel originated the enmity between Garuda and the serpents and his quest for the nectar of immortality — the jar of which he holds in his right upper hand.

Garuda's wife is **Unnati** (progress) also called **Vināyakā** (queen-of-knowledge). He has six sons; **Summukha** (Beautiful-face), **Sunāma** (Beautiful-name), **Sunetra** (Beautiful eyes), **Suvarcas** (Beautiful vigour), **Suruk** (Beautiful brightness) and **Subala** (Beautiful strength).

In order to expound the great spiritual truths contained in the Vedas, the greatest of spiritual masters Veda Vyasa mahamuni composed the Itihasas and Puranas. Our first intimation or concept of Spirituality is through the medium of the scriptures. The existence of a God can be inferred by logic but through the senses and mind it is impossible to know anything about the Godhead.

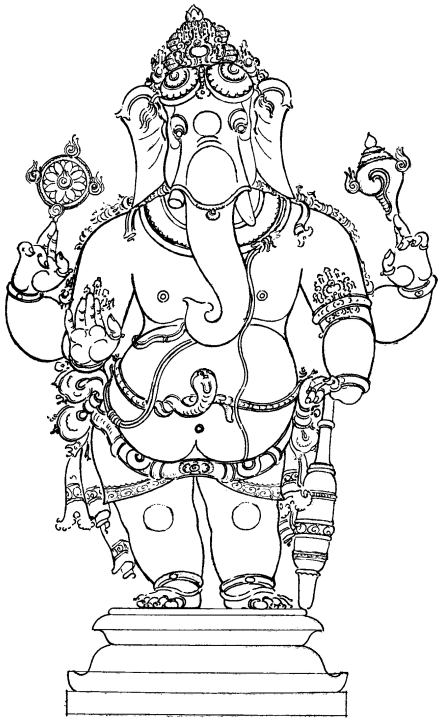
It is through Shastra alone that we can know the Lord; therefore Shastra is the vehicle of Divinity and as such the Shastra are depicted in iconography as Garuda.

According to the Amara-kosha; Garuda is called as *Garutman* which means the stratosphere which surrounds the earth. When the Lord is identified as Surya Narayana, then Garuda becomes the stratosphere which conveys and modifies the rays of the sun to the earth and thus prevents the destruction of life by the intensity of the heat.

22. Viśvaksena

viśvaksenas-tantra mūrtir-viditaḥ pārṣadādhipaḥ |

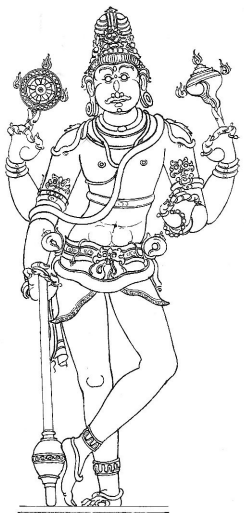
Vishvaksena the chief of the attendants, is the embodiment of the Tantras. (S.B. 12;11;20)



The chief of the attendants of the Lord is Viśvaksena (The-all-conqueror). He is said to represent the Āgamas which are the scriptures which deal with the ceremonial worship of the lord and all matters pertaining to temples, festivals, icons etc. The True Scriptures consist of the Vedas (*Nigamas*) and the Tantras (*Āgamas*). Whereas Garuḍa represents the elitist Vedas, Viśvaksena is the populist Tantras.

He is sometimes shown as a “Vaishnava Ganesha” and sometimes in a human form similar to Viṣṇu but displaying the tarjani mudra.

23. Dvāra-pālakas



nandādayo'ṣṭau dvārasthāśca te'ṇimādyā harerguṇāḥ |

The door-keepers of Vaikunta-the Dvara-palakas represent the 8 yogic powers. (S.B. 12;11;20.)

The eight door-keepers of Vaikuntha are known as *Dhāta* & *Vidhāta* (East), *Bhadra* & *Subhadra* (South); *Nanda*, *Sunanda* (North); *Jaya* & *Vijaya* (West). Sometimes *Nanda* and *Sunanda* are replaced by *Caṇḍa* and *Pracaṇḍa*.

The Yoga Sutras give the following enumeration of the Siddhis:—

1. anima — ability to become infinitely small like an atom

2. mahima — ability to become huge

3. laghima — ability to become very light

4. garima — ability to become very heavy

5. prāpti — ability to obtain anything desired

6. prakāmya — ability to become irresistible

7. īśita — ability to rule over others

8. vaśita — ability to completely subjugate and control others

Some other texts give a slightly different list:—

1. **ātma siddhi**— power to be completely unattached and unaffected by material nature.

2. **vividha siddhi**— power to control matter, and minds of others.

3. **jñāna siddhi**— ability to remember past incarnations of oneself and of others, and the power to see the future.

4. **tapas siddhi**— perfect control over heat and cold, hunger and thirst, etc.

5. **kṣetra siddhi**— ability to astral travel anywhere in the universe.

6. **deva siddhi**— control over devas, demons, elementals, nature spirits and others.

7. **śarīra siddhi**— attainment of physical perfection, to delay the aging process, have perfect health and to heal others.

8. **vikriya siddhi**— power to accomplish all desires, to change ones appearance into any desired form.

These siddhis are the outcome of intense yogic practice, but they are undesirable as they can possibly be the cause of one's downfall from the spiritual path through distraction of the mind from the Ultimate Reality. Sooner or later every serious yoga practitioner is accosted by one of these gate-keepers, but one should not heed them.

THE ETERNAL CONSORTS OF THE LORD

1. Lakṣmī

The power (*śakti*) of Vishnu is represented as the power of multiplicity, or the Goddess of Fortune called **Lakṣmī** ("she-of-the-hundred-thousands"), she is also known as **Śrī** ("the-beautiful-one").

As the consort of Vishnu she appears with Him in every one of His incarnations. She is the Immaculate mediatrix of all Grace and is the embodiment of Compassion and Forgiveness on an absolute level.

She is the preserving energy, and on the material plane this takes the form of resources and wealth. Without wealth there can be no undertaking of religious activities like yajñas, or any charity. Sickness, decay, disease all follow after poverty. Lakṣmī is therefore the power or śakti inherent in wealth.

Lakṣmī is known as **cañcala** (the-fickle-one) and does not remain long in one place, but in iconography she is depicted as always rendering service by massaging the feet of the Lord, she is totally under His control and He uses her for the welfare of all beings.

Lakṣmī is depicted in three aspects and in each one her vehicle differs;

In *sattva guna*; she accompanies Mahā Viṣṇu upon Garuda.

In *rajo guna*; rides alone upon an elephant or sits upon a lotus.

In *tamo guna*; rides alone upon the owl Uluka.

The owl symbolizes wisdom and intelligence, because of its ability to see in the dark, and to allegedly presage events in the future. When Lakṣmī rides upon ūluka the people are blinded by wealth, they forget the true purpose of wealth and destroy themselves with it.

Both Lakṣmī and Śukra (Venus)are the offspring of Bhṛgu and are therefore siblings. Śukra is the preceptor of the Daityas who the elder brothers of the gods and are in fact the "anti-gods" — their philosophy is rank materialism. Some the Divine mother Lakṣmī is thus co-opted by materialists to achieve their selfish goals.

Aṣṭha-Lakṣmī — The 8 Forms of Lakṣmī

Lakṣmī takes 8 primary forms:—

Form of Lakshmi	Iconographical variations
1. Ādi-Lakṣmī — "Primeval Lakṣmī " or Mahā Lakṣmī, lit "The Great Lakṣmī ": an ancient form of Lakshmi and incarnation of Lakṣmī as daughter of sage Bhrigu.	Four-armed, carries a lotus and a white flag, other two arms in *Abhaya mudra* and *varada mudra*.
2. Dhana-Lakṣmī — "Wealth Lakṣmī" presiding over all forms of resources, wealth and prosperity.	Six-armed, garbed in red garments, carries *cakra* (discus), *śaṅkha* (conch), *Amrita kumbha* (a pitcher containing Amrita – nectar of immortality), bow-arrow, a lotus and showing *abhaya mudra* with gold coins falling from it.
3. Dhānya-Lakṣmī — "Grain Lakṣmī" presiding over all forms of agricultural activities and produce.	Eight-armed, garbed in green garments, carries two lotuses, *gadā* (mace), paddy crop, sugarcane, bananas, other two hands in *abhaya mudra* and *varada mudra*.
4. Gaja-Lakṣmī — "Elephant Lakshmi": Giver of animal wealth like cattle and elephants also giver of power of royalty. According to Hindu mythology, Gaja Lakshmi restored the wealth and power lost by Indra (king of gods) when she rose from the churning of the ocean.	Four-armed, in red garments, carries two lotuses, other two arms in *abhaya* and *varada mudras*, flanked by two elephants bathing her with water pots.
5. Santāna Lakṣmī — "Progeny Lakṣmī": Bestower of offspring.	Six-armed, carries two *kalashas* (water pitcher with mango leaves and a coconut on it), sword, shield, a child on her lap, a hand in *abhaya mudra* and the other holding the child. The child holds a lotus.
6. Vīra-Lakṣmī — "Valourous Lakṣmī " or Dhairya-Lakṣmī, "Courage Lakṣmī": Bestower of valour in battles and courage and strength for overcoming difficulties in life.	Eight-armed, garbed in red garments, carries *cakra, śaṅkha,* bow, arrow, t*riśūla* (or sword), gold bar or book, other two hands in *abhaya* and *varada mudras.*
7. Vijaya-Lakṣmī — "Victorious Lakṣmī" or Jaya-Lakṣmī: Giver of victory, not only in battles but also over conquering hurdles in the pursuit of success.	Eight-armed, garbed in red garments, carries *cakra, śaṅkha,* sword, shield, lotus, *pāśa,* other two hands in *abhaya* and *varada mudras*.
8. Vidyā-Lakṣmī — "Knowledge Lakṣmī " presiding over the knowledge of arts and sciences.	Four-armed, garbed in white holding 2 lotuses and showing the *varada* and *abhaya mudras.*

In some Aṣṭa Lakṣmi lists, other forms of Lakshmi are included:—

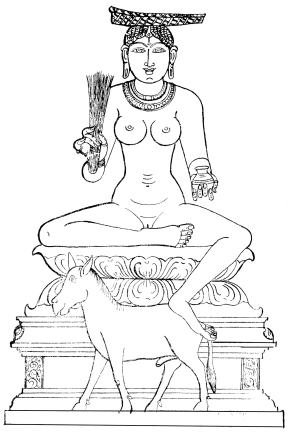
Aiśvarya-Lakṣmī — "Prosperity Lakshmi": Goddess of riches

Saubhāgya-Lakṣmī — "Giver of good Fortune": Giver of prosperity in general.

Rājya-Lakṣmī — "Royal Lakshmi": "She who blesses rulers (with secular power)"

Vara-Lakṣmī — "Generous Lakshmi": "The lady who bestows Beautiful Boons".

Alakṣmī



Lakṣmī has an elder sister who is her opposite. She is also known as Jyeṣṭha — "The Elder" and represents everything that is the opposite of Lakṣmī but they almost always come together. For example if Lakṣmī is gold then Alakṣmī is the environmental pollution and dross that is generated through the production of gold. When Lakṣmī takes the form of rain then Alakṣmī accompanies her as flooding and drought. If Lakṣmī is grain (dhānya-lakṣmī) then Alakṣmī is the husk as well as the destruction of the environment that goes with it's production. If Lakṣmī is children (Santāna-lakṣmī) then Alakṣmī is the pain, suffering, filth and illness that accompanies childbirth. When Lakṣmī is victory (viajay-lakṣmī) the Alakṣmī is the defeat that always accompanies victory. Dhana-lakṣmī (wealth) is always associated with exploitation, corruption or even crime which is Alakṣmī.

Alakṣmī is also identified as the Mahāvidya Dhūmavatī and the goddess of misfortune — Niṛṛti. She resides wherever there is dirt, filth, crime, poverty etc. She is depicted as naked, unkempt and rides a donkey. Her offerings consist of chillies and limes.

2. Bhū-devī

Bhū-devī is the personification of the earth and the symbol of Patience and Tolerance. Lakshmi is the embodiment of **Compassion** and Bhu-devi is the embodiment of **Forbearance**. These are the two energy forces which are required in order to pursue His function of preservation of the universal order (*rita*), and for the liberation of all beings. Thus Lord Viṣṇu as the "Preserver" is associated on a material level with the earth and it's resources and on the ethical level by compassion and forbearance.

In her iconography Bhūdevī is depicted seated under a tree displaying the gesture of fearlessness and holding a globe representing the planet earth. He left foot rests upon a "nidhi-kumbha' — a pot filled with the treasures and resources of the earth.

3. Nīlā Devī

In most Śrīvaishnava temples Lord Narayana is usually accompanied by 2 consorts — Śrī-devi to His right and Bhū-devi to his left.

A third consort is mentioned but seldom actually depicted – this is **Nīlā** devī. She is said to stand behind the Lord — she is his *ahlāda-śakti* — energy of Bliss. All three Goddesses are manifestations of Lakshmi. Nīlā Devī further incarnated on earth during the Krishna Avatāra to become his wife in Gokula.

Rādha — the most popular companion of Krishna in North India is not known in the Southern Vaishnava tradition — her place is occupied by Nīlā-devī. Radha was always the paramour of Krishna whereas Nīlā was his spouse.

The Other Consorts of the Lord

The lord is said to have 8 consorts all together; they represent the eight channels through which the various preserving energies or faculties of the Lord can display their beneficial activities. Some texts differ from each other in the names of the Goddesses.

List 'A'		List 'B'	
śrī	Prosperity	*śrī*	Prosperity, wellbeing
kīrti	Fame	*kīrti*	Fame
śānti	Peace	*vijayā*	Victory
Tuṣṭi	Pleasure.	*śraddhā*	Faith
Puṣṭi	Welfare	*smṛti*	Mindfulness
bhū	Forgiveness	*medha*	Intelligence
Sarasvati	Knowledge	*dhṛti*	Endurance, perseverance
Prīti	Love	*kṣamā*	Forgiveness.

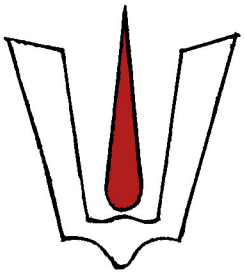
The twelve Shaktis are;

1. Lakṣmī	fortune	*7. Sarasvati*	Communication & learning
2. Puṣṭī	prosperity	*8. Dhṛtī*	endurance
3. Dayā	compassion	*9. Maitrī*	loving kindness, friendliness
4. Nidrā	sleep	*10. Ratī*	Sexual pleasure
5. Kṣamā	forgiveness	*11. Tuṣṭī*	satisfaction
6. Kāntī	beauty	*12. Matī.*	intelligence

Śrīman Narayana manifests in 24 different forms, in each of these forms he is accompanied by Lakshmi. The divine couples are as follows:—

Form of Vishnu		Forms of Lakshmi	
keśava	Having beautiful hair	*kīrti*	Fame, good report, fame, renown
nārāyaṇa	Ground of Being	*kānti*	Beauty, loveliness
mādhava	He propounds the true knowledge about himself	*tuṣṭi*	satisfaction
govinda	Lord of the Earth	*puṣṭi*	prosperity, nourishment
viṣṇu	All pervading	*dhṛti*	fortitude, endurance, persistence
madhusūdana	Slayer of the "honey" demon	*śānti*	peace
trivikrama	He who pervades the 3 vedas	*kriyā*	activity, endeavor
vāmana	Saviour of Indra, he who produces joy in others.	*dayā*	compassion
śrīdhara	The bearer of Śrī who-listens-to-prayers.	*medhā*	intellectual prowess
hṛṣīkeśa	Master of the senses.	*harṣā*	Joy
padmanābha	The navel which contains the universe	*śraddhā*	faith
dāmodara	He who contains the universe in his belly	*lajjā*	modesty
vāsudeva	He who pervades and sports	*lakṣmī*	observing
saṅkarṣaṇa	He who draws others near him.	*saras-vatī*	comforting
pradyumna	The illuminator	*prīti*	love
aniruddha	The irresistible	*rati*	sexual-pleasure
puruṣottama	The Supreme being	*vasudhā*	wealth producing
janārdana	The protector from negative forces.	*umā*	tranquility, quiet
adhokṣaja	The one who is never diminished, or decreased	*smṛti*	perfect mindfulness or memory
upendra	The younger brother of Indra	*kṣamā*	forgiveness
nṛsimha	The one who assumes the celestial man-lion form	*vidyutā*	flashing, glittering
hari	The one who accepts oblations, or the remover of sin.	*śuddhi*	purity
acyuta	He who never falls from his status.	*vijayā*	victory, success, achievement
kṛsṇa	He who is exceedingly delighted with his own Lila.	*buddhi*	intelligence

24. Urdhva puṇḍram

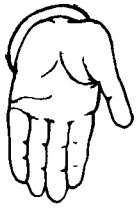


The urdhva-pundram represents the feet of Vishnu. The footprints of a god or saint are supposed to represent their presence and have been popularly worshipped since time immemorial. The *urdhva-pundram* consists of two vertical white lines in the shape of a Y with a base and a central red line. The two white lines represent the feet of the Lord resting upon a lotus pedestal, while the central red line represents Lakshmi. It is significant that as servants of the Lord — dasas or adiyars we wear on the highest part of our body the symbol of the lowest part of our Lord Narayana. The shape of the urdhva-pundram as well as the existence of the red central line differ among the various Vaishnava sects.

THE GESTURES (MUDRAS)

Abhaya Mudra — The Gesture of Fearlessness

This mudra indicates that we should never entertain feelings of fear vis-à-vis God. Vishnu/Narayana is the ocean of compassion and perfect justice and thus there is nothing to fear from Him. It also reminds us that we should never be the cause of fear to any other living being. Fear is the first obstacle in the path of spiritual development.



Varada Mudra — The Gesture of Generosity

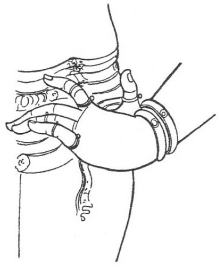
This mudra indicates that God is the personification of generosity — He showers grace and mercy on all alike without requiring anything in return. It also serves to remind us to cultivate the practice of generosity in our own lives and to always be the source of happiness to other sentient beings.

Chin Mudra — The Gesture of Teaching

This mudra indicates that God is the Supreme Guru and repeatedly takes birth in order to teach us the Dharma. In the Incarnation of Krishna he taught the Bhagavad Gita.

Tarjani Mudra — The Gesture of Threat

This mudra is displayed by the guardian deities of the sanctum and serves to remind us to be restrained and to exercise respect and caution when entering into a sacred precinct.



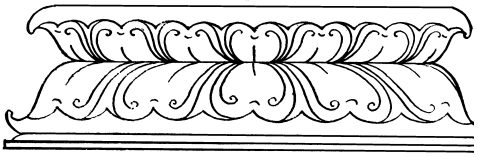
Kaṭi-hasta Mudra — The Gesture of Hand-on-the-hip

This mudra is indicates that surrender to the feet of the God will bring about liberation from Samsāra — the cycle of birth and death.

THE ACCESSORIES

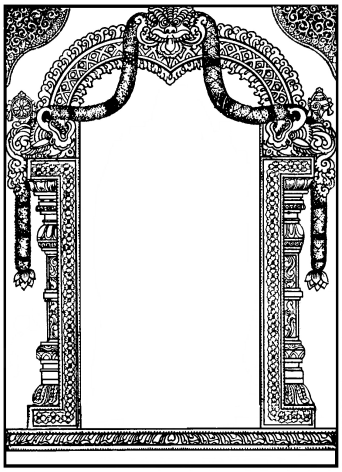
The Lotus Throne

All Hindu deities are either standing or sitting on Lotus Thrones. The lotus is the symbol of the enlightened mind hence indicating that the Gods are all fully manifested in the minds of the enlightened ones.



When we meditate upon Vishnu we visualize a lotus within the heart and upon that pure unsullied lotus we visualize Lord Vishnu in all his glory bedecked in all his paraphernalia.

The Face of Glory



The Kirti-mukha usually forms part of an ornamental doorway in which the deity stands or sits. Above the icon we usually find the "Face-of-Glory" or *Kirti-mukha*. This represents Rāhu — the demon of time that is constantly trying to swallow the sun and moon, and in doing so causes eclipses.

The philosophical significance is to remind us of the impermanence and unsubstantiality of all manifested things — and to discourage us from excessive attachment to things and concepts. All names (*nāma*) and forms (*rūpa*) are subjected to appearance and disappearance, everything in the universe is ephemeral and unsubstantial. It's mocking expression serves to remind us that nothing that

we take seriously is so in the broader picture.

Nitya Suris — the Heavenly Entourage.

These celestial beings are differentiated from other jīvas by the fact that they have never been contaminated by material nature and are the eternal coadjutors of the Lord. But from the view point of attributive consciousness they are the same as all other jīvas. They comprise the retinue of the Lord (*pariṣada devatā*). The duties that they actually discharge are so mysterious that no attempt has ever been made at defining them. They also have one more trait that other jīvas do not have and that is the ability to incarnate at will.

The chief among the Nitya Suris is **Ananta** who is the principle servant of the Lord; acting as His couch, Umbrella etc. **Garuda** who is the vehicle of the Lord and **Viśvaksena** who as the "Lord of Hosts" is the chief minister to the Lord in all affairs Heavenly and mundane.

The other members of the Transcendental entourage are:—

(a) the eight gatekeepers (*Dvārapālakas*) who are said to embody the eight siddhis or yogic powers;

Caṇḍa, Pracaṇḍa, Bhadra, Subhadra, Jaya, Vijaya, Dhātr and Vidhātr.

(b) The eight maid servants of the Lord who stand around Him with fly whisks known as camaras;

Vimala, Utkarsi, jñāna, Kriya, Yoga, Prabhvi, Satya, and Isana.

(c) The eight Guardians of Vaikunta Town who are also the generals in the army of the Lord;

Kumuda, Kumudākṣa, Puṇḍarīka, Vāmana, Saṅkhu-karṇa, Sarva-netra, Sumukha, and Su-pratiṣṭha.

THE ĀḶVĀRS

The Alvars ('those drowning in the Divine) were Tamil poet saints of south India who lived between sixth and ninth centuries and espoused 'devotion' to Visnu-Krishna in their songs of love, ecstasy and service. These twelve Vaishnava saints who lived during the early medieval period of Tamil History helped revive devotional Hinduism (bhakti) through their hymns to Vishnu and his incarnations. The collection of their hymns is known as Divya Prabhandham which is part of the daily liturgy in all Śrīvaishnava temples.

The Bhakti literature these Alvars compiled has contributed to the establishment and sustenance of a culture that broke away from the ritual-oriented Vedic religion and rooted itself in devotion as the only path for salvation. In addition they helped to make the Tamil religious life independent of Sanskrit. The are regarded as the "Rishis" of the South and the Divya Prabandham that they composed is considered on a par with the Sanskrit Vedas. They are referred to as the Dravida Veda.

The one held in greatest esteem among the Alvars is Nammalvar. He lived during the seventh century CE. He contributed a total of 1352 hymns to the four thousand prabandhams. His hymns are considered by the Śrīvaishnavas to contain the essence of the Vedas. His works - Tiru Aasiriyam, Tiru Virudham, Periya Tiruvandadi correspond to the Yajur, Rig and Atharva Vedas respectively. His other work Periya Tirumozhi (Divine words) is the one of the key works of Vaishnavism.

Periyalvar delighted in worshipping Vishnu as mother, nurse, devotee and lady love. Andal, who grew up in Periyalvar's home as his adopted daughter and is the only femail Alvar, composed many poems of love to Krishna, the most popular being the Tiruppaavai, a most beautiful collection of 30 verses giving expression to the purest love of God.

The revered Alvars came from all castes, a symbolic notion in Śrīvaishnavism to show that devotion to God transcends caste. Nammalvar, or Satakopan, belonged to the Vellala (sudra) caste. Tirumangai Alvar belonged to the Kallara tribe, Tirumalisai Alvar belonged to Paraiyar "untouchable" caste. Tiruppani Alvar belonged to Panār "untouchable" caste, Kulashekhara was a warrior and Vishnu Chitta, or Periyalvar was a Brahmin. Interesting enough Nammalvar the Sudra, is the head (kula-pati) of the Śrīvaishnava lineage!

The Alvars in Śrīvaishnava Theology are considered to be the incarnations of the various associates and accoutrements of Lord Vishnu.

Āḷvār Saint		Associates &
Tamil Name	Sanskrit Name	Accoutrements
Pogai āḷvār	Śrī Saro-muni	Pāñcajanya (Conch)
Bhūtat-āḷvār	Śrī Bhūta-muni	Kaumodakī (Mace/Club)
Pey-āḷvār	Śrī Mahadāhvaya-muni	Nandaka (Sword)
Tirumalisai-āḷvār	Śrī Bhaktisāra-muni	Sudarśana (discus)
Nammāḷvār	Śrī Śatakopan	Viśvaksena (Commander-in-chief)
Madhurakavi-āḷvār	Śrī Madhurakavi	Vainateya (Garuda)
Kulaśekhara-āḷvār	Śrī Kulaśekhara	Kaustubha (Gem Necklace)
Periyāḷvār	Śrī Viṣṇucitta	Garuḍa (vehicle)
Andal	Śrī Goda Devi	Bhū-devī (Goddess Earth)
Toṇḍaraḍippodi āḷvār	Śrī Bhaktāṅghrireṇu	Vanamāla (Garland)
Tiruppānāḷvār	Śrī Pāna-suri	Śrīvatsa
Tirumaṅgai āḷvār	Śrī Parakāla-suri	Śāraṅga (Bow)

Pogai

Bhūta

Pey

Tirumalisai

Nammalvar

Madhurakavi

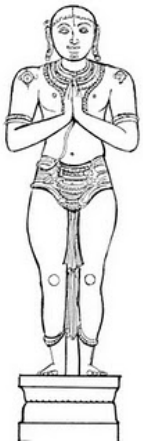
Kulasekhara

Periyalvar

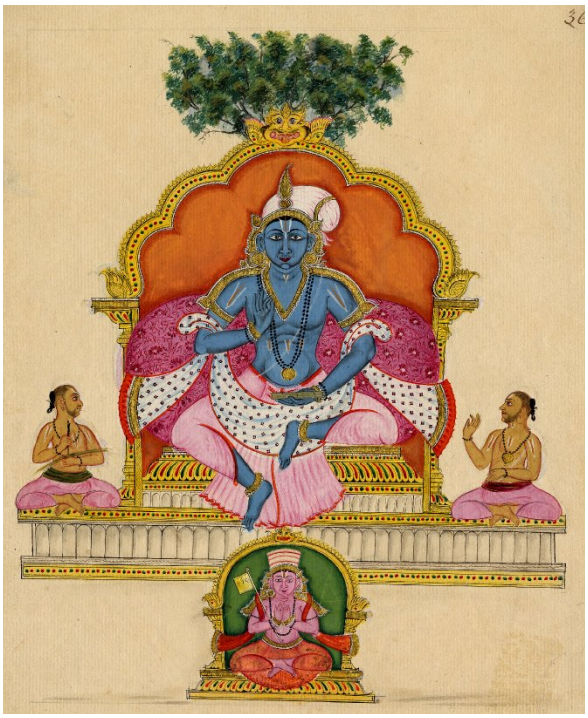
Āṇḍāl

Toṇḍaraḍipoḍi

Tiruppān



Tirumaṅgai



THE INCARNATIONS — Avatāras

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati bhārata |
abhyutthānam-adharmasya tadā'tmānaṃ sṛjāmy-aham || Gita 4: 7 ||

Whenever there is a decline of Dharma*, O Arjuna, and an increase of* Adharma*, then I incarnate Myself.*

paritrāṇāya sādhūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām |
dharma saṃsthāpan-ārthāya saṃbhavāmi yuge yuge || Gita 4:8 ||

For the protection of the good and for the destruction of the wicked, for the establishment of Dharma, I advent myself from age to age.

The doctrine of the Incarnation of God is fundamental to Vaishnava theology, according to His declaration given the in Gita, Vishnu takes on many incarnations but there are only 10 major ones.

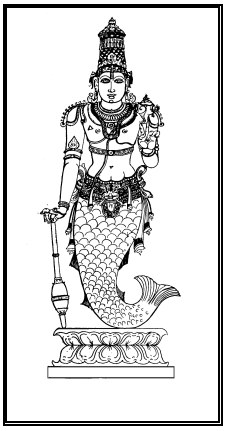
Avatāra	Form	Activity
Matsya	Fish	Saved the world from the flood by guiding the ship of Manu
Kūrma	Turtle	Assisted in the rejuvenation of the gods by facilitating the churning of the ocean to acquire the nectar of immortality.
Varāha	Boar	Rescued the Vedas which were stolen from Brahma and hidden in the ocean.
Narasiṃha	Man-lion	Destruction of the demon king Hiranyakashipu and liberating his son Prahlada.
Vāmana	Dwarf	Vanquished the demon king Bali by tricking him into donating three steps of land and then expanding his form to include the entire universe.
Paraśu-rāma	Rama with the Axe	Destruction of the dynasty of demonic kings who were tormenting the earth.
Rāma-chandra	Rama with the Bow	Killing of the demon king Ravana and his brother Kumbhakarna, establishing of the third brother Vibhishana on the throne and the liberating of his wife Sita who had been kidnapped by Ravana.
Balarāma	Rama with the Plough	The elder brother of Krishna whom he assisted in all his pastimes. Some texts give Buddha as the 7th incar nation.
Kṛṣṇa	Prince of Dwarka	Krishna — the principal incarnation of Vishnu. Who vanquished many demon kings and taught the Bhagavad Gita — one of the principal scriptures of Hinduism to Arjuna his beloved disciple.
Kalki	The future Saviour	Expected at the end of the Age of Quarrel – in about 3000 years!

Some modern commentators have seen in these avatāras a quasi-scientific theory of evolution — from the sea-dwelling fish (*matsya-Avatāra*) through semi aquatic mammals (*kurma-Avatāra*) land-mammals (*Varaha-Avatāra*), half-man (*narasimha-*

Avatāra) primitive human (*vamana-Avatāra*), lower human (*parasurama-Avatāra*), superior human (*ramachandra-Avatāra*), god-man (*Krishna and balarama Avatāras*), future perfection (*kalki-Avatāra*). It is unknown whether this was the original intention of the myth-makers but merely a coincidence.

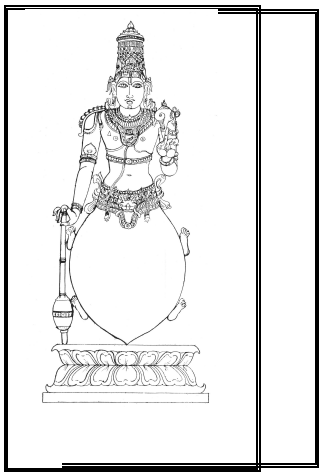
Some of the Symbology and interpretations of the Avatāras are as follows:_

1. Matysa — Fish.



The cycle of birth and death and the cosmos of material existence is called Samsāra — the "ocean" of existence. It has vast unfathomed depths, and is filled with dangerous creatures such as sharks. The fish is representative of jivas (sparks of the divine) that have become sentient beings in the ocean of existence and are swimming around constantly in fear of being eaten by larger fish. And ultimately ending up in the jaws of the shark, which is the most efficient of predators — symbolic of Time that ultimately swallows all things. Śrī Vishnu thus incarnates as a "fish" in the form of the sentient beings that He has come to rescue. The Matsya incarnation thus teaches us that the Lord descends in various shapes and forms of beings in order liberate them from samsāra.

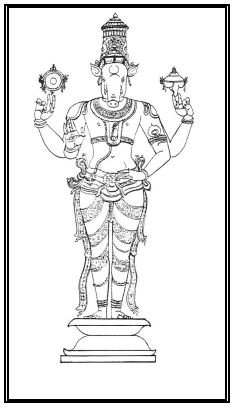
2. Kūrma — Turtle.



The turtle is symbolic of the embodied jiva. It lives both on land and in the water indicating the variety of environments in which sentient beings can survive. It has a hard outer-shell and can withdraw all it's limbs. The body is our "shell" — it is not the real "I" but merely a vehicle for our sojourn in samsāra. True spiritual knowledge is of the difference between the mind-body complex and the Self. The process of meditation and spiritual unfoldment is analogous to the turtle withdrawing it's limbs and going within itself.

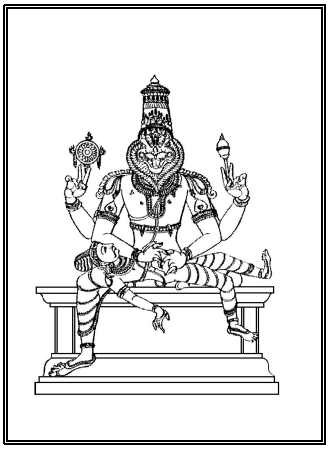
Kurma Avatāra features in the story of the Churning of the Ocean which is a metaphor for the churning of the mind through spiritual practice (sādhana) in order to obtain the nectar of immortality (amrita) which is our true essence.

3. Varāha — Boar



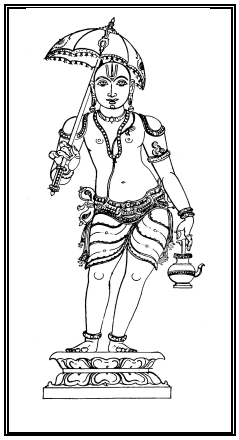
The Boar is the personification of the Vedic Lore. The four feet represent the four Vedas, the sacrificial post its tusk, Syenacit its mouth. The fire was its tongue, the sacrificial ladle the mouth cavity, it's huge and expansive eyes were the sun and the moon. The ponds and wells for holy water were its ears. The Sāman chant was its voice, its body was the sacrificial hall, the oblation was its nostril, the kuśa-grass the hairs on its body, Vedic Hymns were the bristles, the stars and planets formed its necklace, the whirlpool of deluge was its embellishment, thus was the boar the embodiment of Vedic Lore. (Narasimha Purāṇa 39:11-14)

4. Narasimha — Man-lion



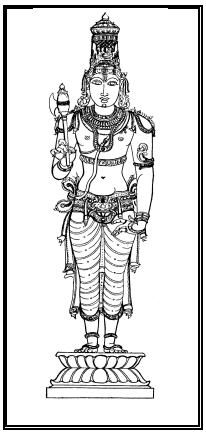
In the story of Narasimha, the demon king Hiranyakashipu requests and obtains a boon from Brahma that he could not be killed by anything which belonged to the realm of opposites — not on earth or the sky, not by day or night, not in his house or outside, not by god or by demon, not by human or beast, etc. etc. Once the boon had been guaranteed Hiranyakashipu became an egocentric tyrant. So in order to dispatch him Lord Vishnu incarnated in a form which transcended all pairs of opposites and killed the demon in the doorway to his house, upon his raised thigh, with his nails. This story teaches us the nature of the ego and it's wayward ways and the nature of the Supreme Being which transcends all pairs of opposites.

5. Vāmana — The Dwarf



The story of Vāmana also involves an egocentric king Bali, although less malicious than Hiranyakashipu! Vishnu takes the form of a Brahmin dwarf — an insignificant being who is usually the subject of mockery and mirth. He requests the gift of land – enough to cross in three strides. The king condescends and Vāmana immediately increases his size — with one step he crosses the earth and the second step the manifest universe — he then asks for his 3rd step — Bali, in humility offers his head. He is forgiven and rewarded with the kingship of the nether regions. Vāmana is the only incarnation which is repeatedly mentioned and praised in the Vedas. It is said to be the best of all incarnations because no one was killed and everyone was benefited and liberated.

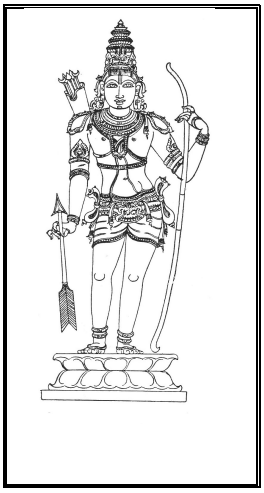
6. Paraśu-rāma — Rama-with-the-axe



This was a partial incarnation which was necessitated by the earth being burdened by a dynasty of oppressive kings (kṣatriyas). Paraśu-rāma was the son of an ascetic Brahmin who had been unjustly abused by the king, in order to avenge his father's honour he set about exterminating the wicked princes.

He was still present on earth during the following 3 incarnations:— Rama with whom he had an encounter, Balarama and Krishna.

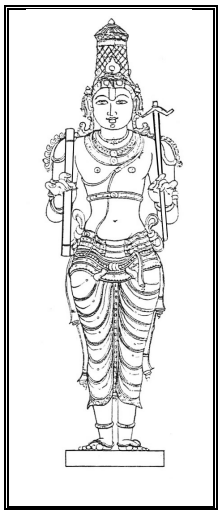
7. Rāma-chandra — Rama-with-the-bow.



The essence of this incarnation was shared among four borthers: Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna. Rama was the most perfect person who ever lived and his biography as retold in the Ramayana serves as a blue-print for our own way of being in the world. Rama teaches by example – and his every act is a teaching on Dharma. Sītā was His wife who was the embodiment of Lakshmi — the mediatrix of compassion. The whole of the Ramayana is about śaraṇāgati — the path of surrender. The most effective way to liberation for sentient beings drowning in the ocean of samsāra is to surrender to God. In the Ramayana everyone ends up surrendering and being benefited – even enemies are pardoned and liberated

Rama is known as maryada-purushottama — The Supreme Examplar of Dharma Practice.

8. Bala-rāma — Rama-with-the-plough

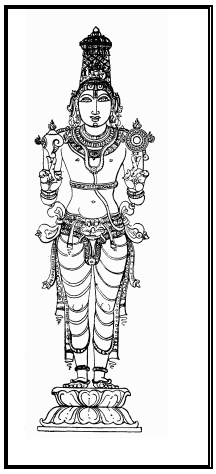


Although considered among the ten principal incarnation of Vishnu Balarama is in fact an Incarnation of Ananta Sesha — the eternal servant of the Lord who acts as his couch — the thousand headed serpent. Born as the elder brother of Śrī Krishna, he serves as the companion and support person for his younger brother.

Ananta Sesha incarnates as the Sage Patanjali — the author of the Yoga Sūtras and according to Tengalai Śrīvaishnava theology as Manavalamahamuni — the last of the acharyas to be deified.

In some texts Balarama is omitted and the Buddha included as an Avatāra. This is seen by some scholars as an attempt to incorporate the Buddhists back into the Vedic Fold.

9. Śrī Kṛṣṇa

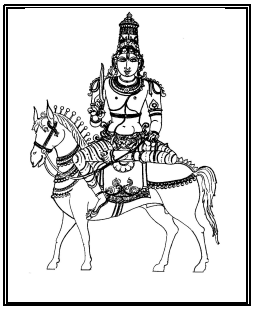


Krishna is considered to be the only complete incarnation of Vishnu (pūrṇa-avatāra). He is Vishnu himself in His totality of being — born on earth in order to establish Dharma. This was done primarily through the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna on the field of battle. His birth was also for the purpose of manifesting His accessibility and loving condescension for all his devotees and for facilitating their surrender to him.

He engaged in many wonderful pastimes — none of which should we attempt to emulate! Krishna is called the upadesha-purushottama — the Supreme Examplar of Teaching. We listen to the teaching of Krishna but follow the example of Rama! Rama and Krishna are the most popular of all the incarnations.

10. Kalki

Kalki is the incarnation that is expected at the end of the current age of Kali in about 5000 years hence. As he has not yet appeared, there are no temples built to him neither is he the object of devotion or veneration.



God in the Para-Vāsudeva form is always accompanied by Lakṣmi or His three consorts Srīdevī, Bhūdevī and Nīlādevī. In each of his emanations of hypostatic forms he is accompanied by a specific emanation or "expansion" of Lakṣmī. These are categorised as the eight śaktis or the twelve śaktis. The translations of the names give us some insight into their nature and functionality.

Manifestation of the Lord		Accompanying Consort	
varāha	*The giver of boons*	niśā	*dream*
mukunda	*The giver of Liberation*	vinadā	*Speechless*
nandaja	*Born of Joy*	sunadā	*The great roar of joy*
satya	*Truth*	bhukti	*Enjoyment*
bhūdhara	*Bearer of the earth*	kledinī	*Moisture*
vaikuṇṭha	*Heaven*	vasudhā	*Earth*
cakrī	*Wielder of the Discus of Time*	jayā	*Victory*
gadī	*Wielder of the mace of justice*	durgā	*Unassailable*
śārṅgī	*Wielder of the Bow of the mind*	prabhā	*Splendour*
khaḍgī	*Wielder of the sword of Knowledge*	satyā	*Truth*
śaṅkhī	*Wielder of the Conch of proclamation*	caṇḍā	*Wrathful*
halī	*Wielder of the plough of cultivation/revelation*	vāṇī	*Speech*
musalī	*The pestle of arduous self-transformation*	vilāsinī	*Manifestation, sport, pleasure*
śūli	*Bearer of the trident of victory over body, speech and mind*	vijayā	*Victory*
pāśī	*Bearer of the Noose of attachment*	virajā	*Dispassion, free from taint*
aṅkuśī	*Bearer of the Goad of motivation*	viśvā	*Cosmos*

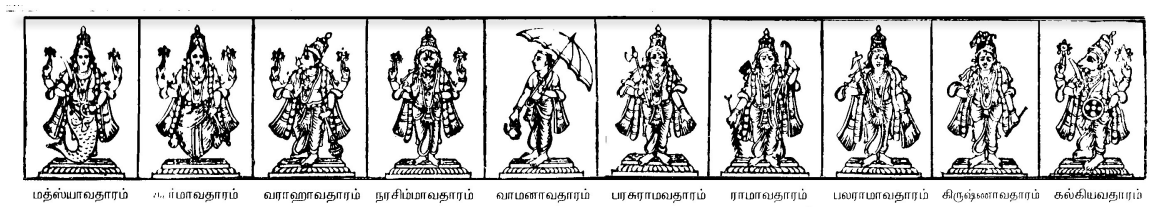
Avatāras and the Navagrahas

The avatāras are associated with the 9 Grahas of Hindu Astrology. The term “graha’ means seizer and includes the seven planets plus Rahu and Ketu which are not actual planets but mathematical points at which the paths of the sun and the moon bisect each other.

Each of the grahas has a regent deity and a vice regent deity

Graha	Adi-Devata — Regent	Pratyadi-Devata — vice-regent	Avatāra
Sun	Agni	Siva	Rama
Moon	Uma/Lakshmi	Apa — The Waters	Krishna
Mars	Skanda	Bhu-devi	Narasimha
Mercury	Narayana	Vishnu	Buddha
Jupiter	Brahma	Indra	Vamana
Venus	Indra	Indrani	Parasurama
Saturn	Prajapati/Siva	Yama	Kurma
Rahu	Bhairava/Durga	Naga	Varaha
Ketu	Ganesha	Chitra-gupta	Matsya
Lagna			Kalki

Śrīvaishnavas as uncompromising monotheists substitute forms of Vishnu for other deities that are prescribed to be worshipped for various astrological maladies. So instead of worshipping the 9 grahas they worship the avatāras instead.



Viṣṇu as Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa

Vishnu is also identified with the Sun as the Self of the universe. The Sun is the controller of time and seasons and is the preserving force as well as the destroying force of the Universe. According to the Śrīmad Bhagavatam (12.11.27-50) the Lord Narayana is the Sun, Lord of Time, He manifests Himself in 12 forms known as the Adityas — the Sons-of-the-primordial-vastness, each with 6 associates as follows:—

Month	Aditya	Apsara	Rākṣasa	Nāga	Yakṣa	Rishi	Gandharva
Caitra	Dhātā	Kṛtasthali	Heti	Vāsuki	Rathakṛt	Pulastya	Tumburu
Vaiśakha	Aryama	Punjikasthali	Praheti	Kacanira	Athaujas	Pulaha	Narada
Jyeṣṭha	Mitra	Menaka	Pauruṣeya	Takṣaka	Rathasvan	Atri	Haha
āṣāḍha	Varuna	Rambha	Citrasvana	Sukra	Sahajanya	Vasiṣṭha	Huhu
śrāvana	Indra	Pramloca	Varya	Elāpatra	Srotā	Angirasa	Visvāvasu
Bhādra	Vivasvān	Anumloca	Vyāghra	Sankhapāl	āsārana	Bhrigu	Ugrasena
Māgha	Pūṣā	Ghritāci	Vāta	Dhananjaya	Suruci	Gautama	Suṣena
Phālguna	Parjanya	Senājit	Varcas	Airāvata	Kratu	Bharadvāj	Visva
Mārga	Amśu	Urvaśi	Vidyucatru	Mahā-śankha	Tārkṣya	Kaśyapa	Ritasena
Puśya	Bhaga	Pūrvacitti	Sphurja	Karkoṭaka	ūrna	āyu	Ariṣṭhanemi
āśvina	Tvaṣṭha	Tilottama	Brahmāpeta	Kambala	śatajit	Jamadagni	Dhritarāṣtra
Kārtika	Viṣṇu	Rambha	Makhāpeta	Aśvatara	Satyajit	Viśvamitra	Sūryavarcas

The **Nagas** bind the wheels of the chariot, the **Yakshas** harness the horses, the **Rakshasas** push the chariot from behind, the **Gandharvas** sing and the **Apsaras** dance before the chariot.

The Sun is the center of creation, it represents the limit, the point where the manifest and the unmanifest worlds unite. (Chandogya Up. 3.19.1.[133]) It is for us the gateway to the path of the gods. As the source of light, physical, mental and spiritual the sun is the nearest image we can conceive of for the Supreme Divinity. The Sun is the visible source of the world in which we live. All that exists was born from the sun. [135]

The sun consists of a fire that consumes its own substance, and thus it is identified with the cosmic sacrifice.

He who dwells in humans and the sun is the same. Taittiriya Up, 2.8.

As our inner self the sun is always directing our minds and inner faculties just as it directs all our vital cycles. This is why the Sun is known as Savitar — the Impeller.

Sūrya Nārāyaṇa has four wives:—

Knowledge (also known as Suvarcala — the Resplendant),
Light — jyoti
Shade — Chaya
Sovereignty — Aishvarya

The 12 Adityas represent the sovereign principles, the personification of the laws that rule the universe and society. They are the pre-existent principles upon which the Universe is based. They are born from Kaśyapa ("Clear vision") and Aditi ("Primordial Vastness"), the totality of Being the first Goddess.

These Cosmic Principles rule the relationship between human beings as well as the relationship between human beings and the forces of Nature.

Thus there are two corresponding sets of sovereign principles one that rules this mundane world and the other that rules the spiritual realm.

Thus there are 6 pairs.—

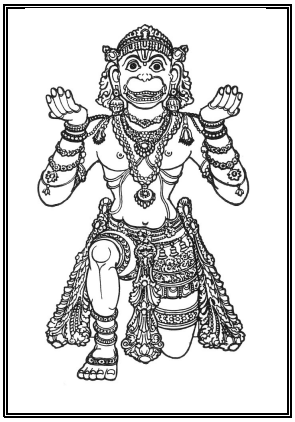
The Six Major Sovereign Principles

Material World		Spiritual World	
Mitra	"Friendship", solidarity, sanctity of the promise.	Varuṇa	"The Binder" the mysterious laws of fate
Aryaman	Chivalry, honour, the rules of society	Dātā	Cosmic Order
Bhaga	The inherited share	Aṃśa	the gods given share

The Six Minor Sovereign Principles

Tvaṣṭra	The Shaper, craftsmanship	Savitra	The Vivifier
Puṣan	the Nourisher, Inner security, prosperity	Indra	The Mighty, courage, outer security, heroism
Vivasvan	The Resplendent, ancestral custom, morality, ethics, the law of righteousness, the traditional law	Viṣṇu	The Pervader, knowledge, the omnipresent cosmic law which governs the order of the Universe.

HANUMĀN



Last but not least, a few words about one of the most popular deities of the Hindu pantheon; Hanuman — the monkey-god. He is considered to be an incarnation of Lord Shiva who was born to assist Rama in his adventures and pastimes. He is one of the main characters in the Rāmāyana and is the embodiment of love and devotion, as well as the paragon of dedicated and unmotivated service.

He also represents the unrealised potential in each and every one of us – if the mythology Hanuman is the son of the Wind-god but doesn't know his true potential until reminded by Jāmbavan the bear. He then accepts the challenge and flies through the air to seek for Sītā in Laṅka.

He performs all sorts of miraculous feat and is rewarded by the boon of perpetual service to the lotus feet of Rāma. So wherever an icon of Rāma is established there will always be one of Hanumān as well.

KĀMA DEVA — Lord Viṣṇu's son

Lord Viṣṇu is the preserver of the Natural as well as Moral Order of the Cosmos (ṛta) and Lakṣmi presides over resources and all forms of prosperity and pleasure. Together they give birth to Kāma Deva or the God of Desire which is most primal drive in the universe and therefore a force which must be reckoned with. Kāma is said in some texts to be Self-born but in other texts like the Harivamśa he is said to be the son of Lakṣmī. He was also reborn after his destruction by Lord Śiva as Pradyumna the son of Kṛṣṇa.

Kāma is the personification of Desire in general, but the most specific and powerful of all desire-forces is the libido or sex-drive which is linked to the procreation and preservation of the Universe.

Kāma has 2 wives:— 1. **Rati** — the pleasure obtained from intercourse and 2. **Prīti** — love and affection for another. He also has a younger brother named **Krodha** — Anger, a daughter named **Tṛṣā** — thirst or craving, and a son named **Aniruddha** — the Unobstructed. His best friend and eternal companion is **Vasanta** — spring, and he is always accompanied by the demons called the **Māras** — strikers or killers. He is served by the Gandharvas and the Apsaras.

The Accoutrements

Kāma Deva is the presiding deity of the mind, the god of beauty and youth. He is usually pictured as a handsome proud adolescent riding a parrot. He carries a bow made of sugarcane with a string comprised of bees. He holds five arrows.

Śuka — the parrot symbolizes Truth for whatever is taught to the parrot is repeated verbatim. The parrot does interpret or process what it hears and learns but only repeats it exactly.

Ikṣu-kodaṇḍā — the sugarcane bow. Sugarcane is sweet at the oldest part signifying that true love comes with age. The leaves of the sugarcane are sharp and capable of cutting one, the powder from the leaves is also a severe irritant, indicating that desire is always accompanied by hurt. This idea is further strengthened by the bees forming the string of

the bow. Bees produce honey but they also sting. Honey cannot be gotten without some risk of pain!

Pañca-bāṇa — the five arrows symbolize the five flowers associated with romance as well as the five senses which are all affected by the active libido. Desire is fulfilled through all the senses — sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

Vasanta — Kāma deva is most active when accompanied by his mate Spring, all the biological universe is aroused and active in reproduction.

Māras — wherever Kāma goes the Striker follow. All desire is accompanied by suffering in some form — either suffering from the intensity of the love or deprivation of it or its loss. It is well attested that Love so very easily turns into Hate, which is another aspect of the same Love force.

Some of Kāmadeva's names are:—
Madana — "He who intoxicates with love." *Manmatha* — "He who agitates the mind." *Māra* — "He who injures." *Pradyumna* — "He who conquers all" or "He who illumines all" *Anaṅga* — "He who is without a body."

ŚUKRĀCĀRYA — Lakṣmī's Brother

Both Lakṣmī and Śukra (The planet Venus) are the offspring of the sage Bhṛgu. Śukrācārya was the preceptor of the anti-gods and promulgated materialism. As the preceptor to Bali Maharāja he also confronted Lord Viṣṇu in the Vāmana incarnation and was blinded by Him in his one eye.

Lakṣmī as the goddess of resources and prosperity is suitably regarded as the sister of 'Materialism' — but when the teachings of Śukra are restrained and tempered by the compassion and ethical character of Lakṣmī then materialism works for the benefit of all sentient beings and becomes a source of Universal welfare.

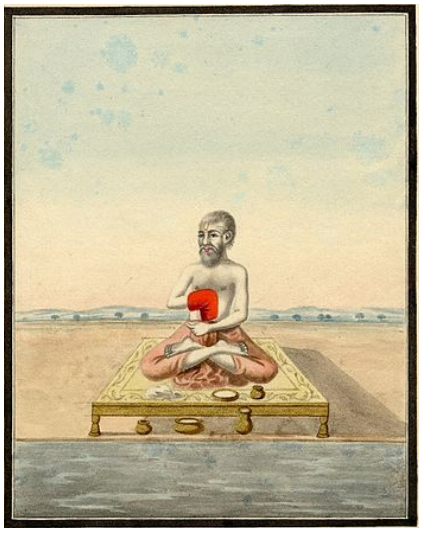
THE MINOR INCARNATIONS OF VIṢṆU

1. Nara & Nārāyaṇa (Divine Love & Devotion)

The twin sons of Dharma (Righteousness) and his wife Ahiṃsā (non-violence) are credited with promulgating the message of Prema (divine love) and Bhakta (devotion). The engaged in extreme austerity (*tapasya*) which terrified the gods who sents the most beautiful apsaras to divert them. Narayana slapped his thigh and from it arose a nymph more beautiful than the celestial ones, the new apsaras was called Urvaśī — "Born-of-a-thigh" and became the most prominent nymph in Indra's paradise. Later they vanquished a demon called Sahasra-kavaca (A thousand armours).

This story has an important lesson for us. Every one of us is a mixture of the human and the divine elements. The anti human and the anti divine demon is ever attempting to seduce us with his thousand wiles. To successfully vanquish him, we need to perform Tapas or austerity. These sages were reborn later as Sri Krishna and Arjuna.

2. Kapila (philosophy)



Kapila was the celebrated teacher of Saṅkhya philosophy. Kapila was a Vedic sage credited as one of the founders of the Samkhya school of philosophy. He is prominent in the Bhagavata Purana, which features a theistic version of his Samkhya philosophy. Traditional Hindu sources describe him as a descendant of Manu, a grandson of Brahma. The Bhagavad Gita depicts Kapila as a yogi hermit with highly developed siddhis, or spiritual powers.

Many of the details about sage Kapila's life are described in Book 3 of the Bhagavata Purana, where it is mentioned that his parents were Kardama Muni and Devahuti.

Kapila is considered an incarnation of the supreme-being Vishnu and listed as such in the list of incarnations in Bhagavata Purana. After his father left home, Kapila instructed his mother, Devahuti in the philosophy of yoga and devotional worship of Lord Vishnu, enabling her to achieve liberation (moksha). Kapila's Sankhya is also given by Krishna to Uddhava in Book 11 of the Bhagavata Purana, a passage also known as the "Uddhava Gita."

Considering him as an incarnation of Viṣṇu was probably a social manoeuvre to include some non Aryan elements into Aryan civilization.

3. Dattātreya (Magic)

Dattatreya was a teacher of the Anti-gods (Asuras) and the originator of Tantra and also restored Vedic rites (Mahabharata 2.48.2 – 4) He is said to have been born from an emanation of Viṣṇu which impregnated the wife of Sage Atri (The Devourer).

Dattatreya created the soma creeper, he was a libertine who was addicted to wine and women and music. His habitual association with people of low birth made him ritually impure. But in spite of this life-style he was a favourite of the gods whom he had saved from the anti-gods.

In the Bhagavatam there is an account of Dattatreya explaining to King Yadu what he has learned from 24 “gurus” including animals, insects, the earth etc.

4. Yajña (Ritual Sacrifice)

Viṣṇu has always been identified with yajña and is designated as yajña-puruṣa. Many of the legends of Viṣṇu in the Vedas link him in some way or other with the yajña. According to the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (1:7:19 – 21) one of the Prajāpatis (Lords-of-progeny) who assist Brahma in the work of creation, named Ruci (Desire) married Ākūti (Will). From them were born Yajña (Ritual Sacrifice) and his sister Dakṣiṇā (Sacrificial fee). These two united as a couple and had 12 sons called Yāmas (Invocations).

Yajña had the head of a deer and was decapitated by Vīrabhadra at the sacrifice held by Dakṣa. The head then arose into the sky and became the constellation Mṛga-śīrṣa.

The entire universe which is in a constant state of flux is like a sacrifice and the Lord responsible for this creation is looked upon as the personification of that sacrifice. Hence he is Yajña or Yajñesvara.
His image has two heads, seven hands, three legs and four horns. The hands carry the sacrificial implements like ājyapātra (vessel holding the ghee) Sruk, Sruva and Juhu

(various kinds of spoons and ladles), apart from Sankha and Chakra. Obviously this is a symbolical representation, the various limbs representing the various items of the sacrifice.

5. Dhanvantari (Medical Science)

Dhanvantari (Moving-in-a-circle) emerged from the 'Ocean of Milk' and appeared with the pot of nectar during the story of the Samudra or Sagar manthan whilst the ocean was being churned by the devas and asuras, using the Mandara mountain and the serpent Vasuki. The pot of Amrita was snatched by the Asuras or Demons, and after this event another avatar, Mohini, appears and takes the nectar back from the Asuras.

Dhanvantari is the patron god of Āyur-veda and was a master of universal knowledge. He was originally a Vedic god who had offerings made to him in the north-eastern corner of the yāga-śālā at twilight.

Dhanvantari is depicted with four hands, holding medical herbs in one hand and a pot containing rejuvenating nectar called *amrita* in another.

6. Hayagrīva or Hayaśīrṣa (Promulgater of Scripture)

Hayagrīva was an incarnation of Viṣṇu who dove to the bottom of the ocean to rescue the Vedas which had been stolen by two Dānavas who had also assumed horse-heads.

Yajñavalkya, the great sage, lost the Yajur-veda as a result of his Guru's curse and performed sever penance. Sun god, pleased by his penance, appeared before him as a deity with the horse's head and taught him the same Veda in another form. This section has come to be known as the Vājasaneyi Saṃhita (*Vāji* = horse).

The origins of the Hayagriva Avatāra (the deity with the horses head) are perhaps found here. He is the guardian and patron of all Vedic scriptures and is essential a wisdom-deity.

7. Vyāsa (Compiler of Scripture)

It is said that there have been twenty-eight Vyāsas before the present Vyāsa-Krishna Dvaipayana-took his birth at the end of Dvapara Yuga. Krishna Dvaipayana was born of Parasara Rishi through the Matsya-kanya-Satyavathi Devi. At a very tender age Vyāsa gave out to his parents the secret of his life that he should go to the forest and do Akhanda Tapas. His mother at first did not agree, but later gave permission on one important condition that he should appear before her whenever she wished for his presence. Puranas say that Vyāsa took initiation at the hands of his twenty-first Guru, sage Vasudeva. He studied the Shastras under sages Sanaka and Sanandana and others. He arranged the Vedas for the good of mankind and wrote the Brahma Sūtras for the quick and easy understanding of the Srutis; he also wrote the Mahabharata to enable women, Sudras and other people of lesser intellect to understand the highest knowledge in the easiest way. Vyāsa wrote the eighteen Puranas and established the system of teaching them through Upakhyanas or discourses. In this way, he established the three paths, viz., Karma, Upāsana and Jñana. To him is also attributed the fact that he continued the line of his mother and that Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura were his progeny. Vyāsa's last work was the Bhagavata which he undertook at the instigation of Devarshi Narada who once came to him and advised him to write it as, without it, his goal in life would not be reached.

There are six important systems of thought developed by our ancients known as the Shad Darshanas or the six orthodox schools of philosophy, viz., Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaiseshika, Purva Mimamsa and Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta. Each system has a different shade of opinion. Later, these thoughts became unwieldy, and to regulate them, the Sūtras came into existence. Treatises were written in short aphorisms, called "Sūtras" in Sanskrit, meaning clues for memory or aids to long discussions on every topic. In the Padma Purana, the definition of a Sutra is given. It says that a Sutra should be concise and unambiguous; but the brevity was carried to such an extent that the Sutra has become unintelligible and particularly so in the Brahma Sūtras. Today we find the same Sutra being interpreted in a dozen ways. The Brahma Sūtras written by Vyāsa or Badarayana — for that was the name which he possessed in addition-are also known as Vedanta Sūtras as they deal with Vedanta only. They are divided into four chapters, each chapter being subdivided again into four sections. It is interesting to note that they begin and end with Sūtras which read together mean "the inquiry into the real nature of Brahman has no return", meaning that "going by that way one reaches Immortality and no more returns to

the world". About the authorship of these Sūtras, tradition attributes it to Vyāsa. The oldest commentary on the Brahma Sūtras is by Sankaracharya; he was later followed by Ramanuja, Vallabha, Nimbarka, Madhva and others who established their own schools of thought. All the five Acharyas mostly agree on two points, viz., (i) that Brahman is the cause of this world and (ii) that knowledge of Brahman leads to final emancipation. But they differ amongst themselves on the nature of this Brahman, the relation between the individual soul and the Supreme Soul, and the condition of the soul in the state of release. According to some, Bhakti and not Jñana, as interpreted by Sankara, is the chief means of attaining liberation.

8. Mohinī (Enchantress)

Lord Vishnu as Mohini

This is a female form assumed by Viṣṇu to delude the anti-gods and to cheat them out of the amṛta which they had stolen from the gods. But Mohinī has a much deeper philosophical significance. There are two sources of Truth — Material Truth (*sakala*) and Spiritual Truth (*niṣkala*). The transient and relative Material Truth is embodied in a feminine form of Prakṛti and the Absolute timeless Spiritual Truth is embodied in the masculine aspect of Puruṣa (That which fills the Universe). The incarnation of Mohinī illustrates that these are not separate Truths but rather integrated versions of the same reality. We should recognise them as being different but accept them both and integrate both of them into our lives.

9. Vaṭa-patra-śāyin

At the end of a cycle of time the Lord dissolves the entire universe and absorbs it into his own Being. Mythologically he then takes the form of a baby lying upon a banyan leaf floating on the ocean of undifferentiated Unity sucking his own toe. The entire universe is contained within his belly.

At the end of a refractory period the Lord again projects the universe into being again. This constitutes an eternal circular process of projection and withdrawl of the universe. 'Big-bang' (*sṛṣṭi*) followed by the 'Big-crunch' (*pralaya*) and so on and so forth.

Other Popular Forms of Viṣṇu Worshipped

Throughout the provinces of India, the Supreme Lord is worshiped in various forms. In Andhra Pradesh He appears as Tirupati Balaji, in Kerala as Guruvayurappan, in Karnataka as the beautiful Udupi Krishna, in Gujarat as Dvarakadhisha and Ranacora Raya. And in Pandharpur, the spiritual capital of Maharashtra, the Lord is worshiped as Sri Vitthala. His devotees also fondly call Him Vithobha or Panduranga.

The Padma Purana and the Skanda Purana briefly describe why the Lord journeyed to Pandharpur and why He stays there in this form.

Once Srimati Radharani, Lord Krishna's consort in the village of Vrindavana, visited Dvaraka, where Lord Krishna lived as a king. At that time, Rukmini Devi, Lord Krishna's queen, noticed that Krishna was dealing more intimately with Radharani than He had ever done with her. Upset, she departed for the forest of Dindirvana, near Pandharpur.

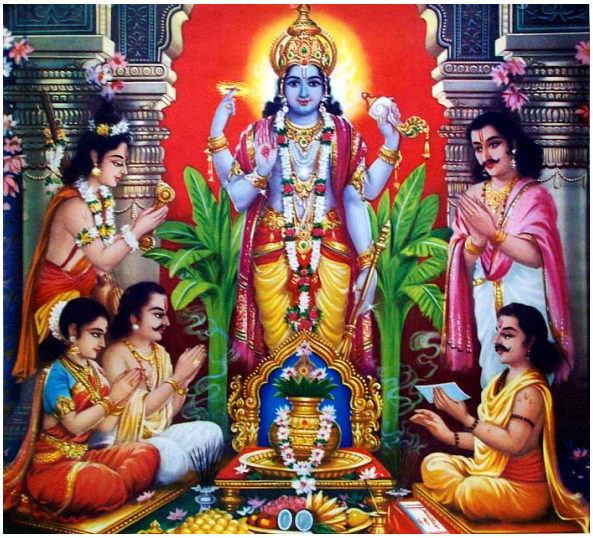
Lord Krishna followed Rukmini to apologize, but His apology left her unmoved. So the Lord moved on to Pandharpur to visit one of His devotees, Bhakta Pundarika, now popularly known in Maharashtra as Pundalika.

When the Lord reached Pundarika's ashrama, Pundarika was serving his elderly parents. So Pundarika gave the Lord a seat of brick and asked the Lord to wait. The Lord did as told. He stood, lotus hands on His hips, waiting for Pundarika to return.

While He was waiting, Rukmini, having forgotten her distress, came from Dindirvana and rejoined Him. Both of Them stayed in Pandharpur in Iconic form. To this day the Lord stands on the same brick, but now He's waiting for all His devotees to come see Him.

Satya Nārāyaṇa

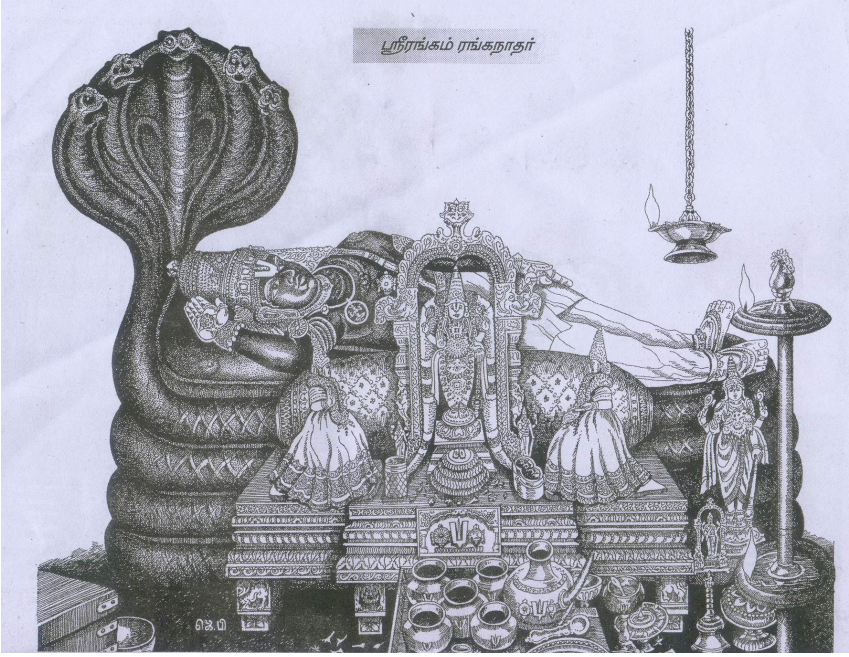
This is one of the most popular forms of Viṣṇu widely worshipped by all Hindus all over the world. The observance of this vow (vrata) which consists of a fast and a puja is described in the Skanda Purāṇa 4th section. There are a number of material and spiritual results mentioned through it's performance. The ceremony is often performed as an adjunct to marriages or house-warming ceremonies.



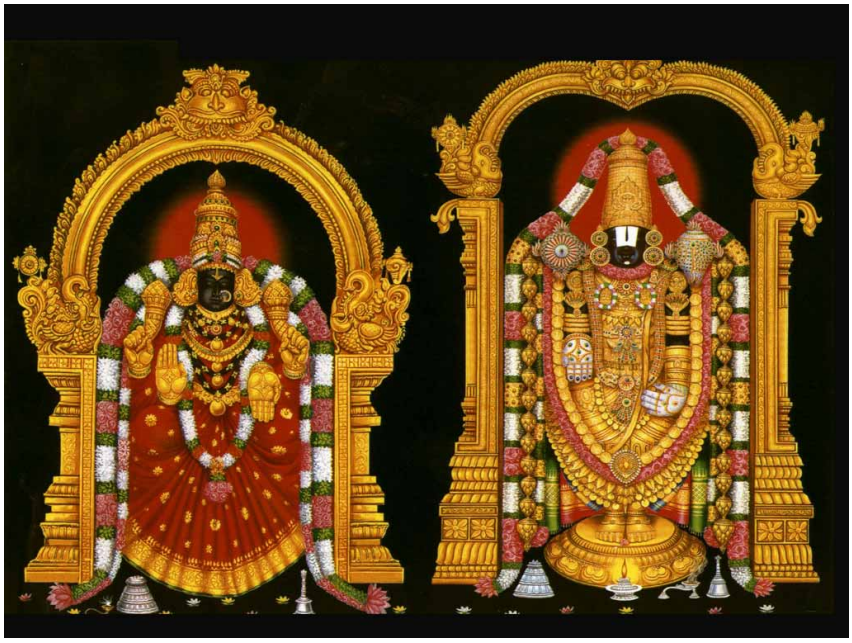
THE FOUR MAJOR VIṢṆU TEMPLES

There are 108 Divya Deshams or pilgrimage sites located all over India. For Srivaishnavas the four most important temples are:—

1. Ranga-nātha Swami at Srirangam



2. Venkateswara Swami at Tirupati



3. Varadaraja Swami at Kanchi

4. Selva-Narayana Swami at Melkote

Procession of Ranganatha

EXPLANATORY TEXTS

1.

Astra-abhūṣana-adhyāya (Vishnu Purana 1;22)

Maitreya said:

Tell me in what manner Vishnu bears the whole world, abiding in his nature, characterised by ornaments and weapons. 65

Parashara said:

Having offered salutation to the mighty and indescribable Vishnu, I now recount to you what was formerly related to me by Vasishitha. 66

The glorious Hari wears the pure jivatman of the world, undefiled, and void of all qualities, as the Kaustubha gem. 67

Material Nature (Pradhana/prakrti) is established on the Eternal One, as the Śrīvatsa mark. Intellect abides in Madhava, in the form of his mace (gada). 68

The lord (Iswara) supports the principle-of-Individuality (Ahamkara) in its twofold division & into elements (tamasika) and organs of sense (sattvika) in the form of his conch-shell (Shankha) and his bow (saranga) respectively. 69

In his hand Vishnu holds, in the form of his discus (sudarshana); the cosmic mind, whose thoughts (like the weapon) fly swifter than the winds. 70

The necklace of the Lord called Vaijayanti-mala, composed of five precious gems (pearl, ruby, emerald, sapphire and diamond) is the aggregate of the five elemental forms of matter (maha-bhutas). 71

Janardana bears, as his numerous arrows, both the faculties of action (karmendriyas) and of perception (jñanendriyas). 72

The shinning sword of Achyuta is sacred wisdom, usually concealed in the scabbard of ignorance. 73

In this manner, jivatman, Material Nature, intellect, notion-of-individuality, the elements, the senses, mind, ignorance and wisdom, O Maitreya, are all located in the person of Hrshikesha. 74

Hari, in a mystical form, embodies the formless elements of the world, as his weapons and his ornaments, for the salvation of humankind. 75

Pundarikaksha, the lord of all, supports Nature, with all its products, the individual selves and all the world. 76

All wisdom, all ignorance, O Maitreya, all that is, all that is not, all that is everlasting, is centred in the Destroyer-of-Madhu, the lord of all creatures. 77

The supreme, eternal Hari is [the personification of] Time with its divisions of seconds, minutes, days, months, seasons, and years. 78

He is [the embodiment of Space in the form of] the seven worlds, the earth, the sky, heaven, the world of patriarchs, of sages, of saints, of truth: whose form is all worlds; first-born before all the first-born, the supporter of all beings, himself self-sustained. 79 — 80

He exists in manifold forms, as gods, humans, and animals etc. and is thence the eternal sovereign Lord of all. His form is all visible things; but He himself is without shape or form. 81

He is celebrated in the Rik, Yajush, Sama, and Atharva Vedas, Itihasas, the Upavedas and the 6 divisions (angas) of the Vedas and also the Vedanta. 82

The Vedas and all their divisions, the Institutes of Manu and other lawgivers; traditional scriptures, and Religious manuals (Puranas and Kalpa-Sūtras etc). 83

The poems, and all that is said or sung; are the body of the mighty Vishnu, assuming the form of sound. 84

Every kind of substances, that which is with form or without form, here or elsewhere, are all the physical manifestation (vapu) of Vishnu. 85

"I am Hari. All that I behold is Janardana; cause and effect are from none other than Him." — The person who knows these truths shall never again experience the afflictions of the cycle of birth and death. 86

2.

The Divine Form Explained S.B.12:11

The Cosmic Form of the Lord (1-9)

Saunaka said: 1. Now we have got to ask one more question to you who are a master of all learning. You are well acquainted with the doctrines of the Tantras. 2. To the Supreme Being, the Lord of Śrī, who is One only, the masters of the Tantra have for purposes of worship given physical features, accessories, weapons, decorations etc. We would like to know the significance, the principle, behind such conceptions. 3. Describe to us, who are anxious to hear, all about ritualistic worship prescribed by the Tantras, by means of which man can attain the immortal state.

Suta said:— 4. Saluting my teachers, I shall impart to you what has come down from teachers like Brahma and others, as taught by them through the Vedas and the Tantras, about the glory and greatness of the Supreme Being Maha-vishnu. 5. The changeful Cosmic Form of the Lord known as Virat is constituted of nine categories — Prakriti, Sutratma, Mahat-tattva, Ahamkara, and the five Tanmatras. The whole of the cosmos is

seen subsisting in the Cosmic Form (Virat) which is based in Consciousness. 6. As the Virat is based on the Supreme Being, He is said to be embodied as the Purusha or Virat. The earth is His feet; the heaven, his head; the intermediary space, His navel; the sun, his eyes; the air, His nose; and the quarters, His ears. 7. Prajapati is His sex organ; Mrityu (Death), His rectum; the Lokapalas, His arms; the moon, His mind; and Yama, His eye-brows. 8. Bashfulness is His upper lip; greed, His lower lip; light, His teeth; Maya His smile; the trees, His hair; and the clouds, His locks. 9. Just as the individual, when measured by the span of his palm, is of seven span dimension, so is the Virat too, when measured by His span of cosmic dimension. So also whatever parts there are in the individual body, they are in the Purusha too.

The Symbolism of the Paraphernalia of Mahavishnu (10-20)

10. What He wears under the guise of the jewel Kaustubha is the pure Jiva-consciousness. The spreading effulgence of the Jiva is what is seen on His chest as the mark Śrīvatsa. 11. The garland of wild flowers worn by the Lord is His Maya with diverse attributes; His yellow wearing cloth is the Veda, and the sound symbol OM with its three syllables, the sacred thread he wears. 12. He has Sankhya and Yoga as the crocodile-shaped earrings and the crown on His head is the Satya-loka, superior to all other Realms. 13. His. seat, the well-known Ananta or Adisesha (conceived as the Serpent of Infinity) is Avyakrita, the undifferentiated Prakriti. The lotus on His seat is Sattva Guna having attributes like Dharma and Jñana [*vairagya, aishvarya, adharma, ajñana, avairagya* and *anaishvarya*] as petals. 14. The Prana, the vital energy of the cosmos, which includes the strength of the senses, mind and body, is represented by His mace Kaumodaki; the category of water, by His conch Panchajanya; and the category of fire, by His discus Sudarsana. 15. His sword, with its blue sheen, is the category of space; His shield, Tamas, the element of darkness; His bow Sarnga is the principle of Time; and His quiver, the accumulation of Karma. 16. His arrows represent the Indriyas (sense-organs); His chariot, the mind dominated by will; His power of manifestation, the Tanmatras; and His hand gestures represent the desire to bless and to protect. 17. The Mandala for offering Him worship is the orb of the sun. The qualification for worshipping Him is initiation with Mantra from a teacher. His service is for the absolution of all one's sins including negative tendencies. 18. The play-lotus in His hand symbolises his six majesties like lordship (Aisvarya) and the rest. The two ceremonial fans (Chamaras) held on either side are righteousness (Dharma) and Yashas (glory). 19. O twice-born ones! The royal umbrella held over Him represents the Realm of Vaikuntha, the state of bliss and freedom from fear. The Lord, who is known as Yajña and who has Yajña as His form, is borne by his vehicle Garuda, who is the embodiment of the three Vedas. 20. Śrī, who remains inseparable from Him, is the Shakti, the manifesting Power of Śrī Hari. Vishvaksena, the leader of his attendants, is the embodiment of the Tantras. His eight guards headed by Nanda are His eight psychic yogic powers like Anima etc.

The Vyuhas (21-26)

21. The one Supreme Being can be worshipped as the four Vyuhas — Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, who are only the four presentations of the one

Being. 22. He is also conceived as Vishwa, Taijasa, Prajña, and Turiya manifestating through external objects (*artha*), senses (*indriya*), mind (*ashaya*) and wisdom (*jñana*). 23. In the form of the four Vyuhas — Aniruddha, Pradyumna, Sankarshana, and Vasudeva — with their distinctive physical features (Anga), accessories (*Upanga*), decorations (*Akalpa*), and weapons (*Ayudha*), Śrī Hari sustains the four states of consciousness — *Viswa* (waking), *Taijasa* (dream), *Prajña* (sleep) and *Turiya* (*Samadhi*). But being the Lord of all, this manifestation does not in the least affect His Being or His majesty and Lordship, unlike in the case of the Jivas and material entities undergoing change. 24. O learned one! He is the source of the Veda. He is the self-luminous awareness. He is perfect in Himself by His own greatness. He is intuited in their self by those who seek Him. By His own Maya or inherent power, He creates, protects and destroys the whole universe under the names of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara, without the slightest dimming of His spiritual Self-awareness as the one Invisible Spirit. (He is spoken of under these three names according to function only.)

25. O Krishna, the friend of Arjuna! O Thou the Vrishni leader that was like a fire to the forest of evil and tyrannical rulers! O Thou of unfading power and majesty! O Thou Govinda whose holy fame is sung about in the gatherings of Gopis and by the sages in attendance on Thee! Be Thou propitious and protect us, Thy devotees, for evermore, O Thou whose very name is a blessing unto mankind! 26. Whoever, getting up in the early morning and concentrating his mind on the Lord, thinks over and repeats these passages which expound the significance of the Lord's form, attributes and accessories will realise Him, who resides in the hearts of all.

Vishnu - Narayana

By Swami Chinmayananda

Analyzing the human personality, the Vedanta takes the student to discover the State of Pure consciousness in the innermost depths of his being, which is the One Source at once for all his perceptions, feelings and thoughts,

This great Self, functioning as the Spark of Existence in each one of us, is the One Eternal Reality. When it expresses through the vehicles of the mind and intellect there is the dynamic creature - constantly acquiring and possessing, gaining and achieving good and bad in the world - and this all-pervading Reality that expresses from behind the mind and the intellect is the theme of all the great scriptures of the world.

Vyāsa describes this great Reality, in his "Vishnu-Purana" as Śrī Narayana. Śrī Narayana has been shown as resting in yogic-sleep in Vaikuntha. It is described that in an ocean of milk (Ksheerabdhi) Śrī Narayana lies in yoga-nidra on a great serpent-bed (Ananta), protected by the hood of the serpent. He is served by Lakshmi, His consort, who is ever at His feet.

Deep in the recesses of our personality (Vaikuntha) lies the Infinite Truth (Vishnu) upon the serpent-Ananta (the mind) who is depicted as thousand-headed. In an religions the serpent represents the vicious mind which, at one and the same time, can think a thousand thoughts and, perhaps, spin its venom through its thousand urges, inclinations, desires and passions. In life it is found that the hooded cobra, to strike its victim, turns its hood away from his body. When the mind is turned towards the world of objects outside, it is capable of spilling its poison on to the world outside.

Here in the description, the hoods are turned upon the body of the serpent and it is lying coiled upon itself, forming a soft bed upon which reclines the Lord Vishnu (All Pervading). When the multi-headed human mind turns its attention inward upon" itself, and the mind lies coiled upon itself, there is the state of a meditator at the moment of his greatest quietude (Samadhi). At such moments the Infinite Vishnu can be recognized as resting upon such a thought-less mind held in animated suspension in an atmosphere of breathless devotion. The Lord is in "yogic-sleep". It means that looking from the Pure Consciousness., the world known to us constituted of the perceptions, emotions and thoughts, is not there at all; just as in our sleep we do not recognize the world-of plurality. But this is not the ordinary sleep (nidra); it is a moment of positive experience of the All-Pervading Reality, and hence it is called the yoga-nidra.

Such a vision of the Lord can be experienced by the mind when it turns upon itself; and the mind can gain this steady introversion only in an atmosphere of supreme purity. Hence it is described that He is resting in the "milky-ocean" in the ocean of the milk of human kindness.

Lakshmi (Wealth, Power and Glory) rests at His feet, serving Him. A Man of Realization, who, through meditation has thus experienced the Soul of the Universe in himself, does not thereafter run after the wealth of the world of objects ; all glory follows him at his heels, wanting to serve him as his dutiful mistress.

Lord Narayana is, the One among the Trinity, representing the Power-of-Sustenance. He is the One who manifests Himself in the mortal world at appropriate eras in His various incarnations to rid life of its evil propensities and to make the world ready for greater evolution. When this benign Lord wakes up from His yogic-sleep and comes down to bless those who are His devotees, He assumes the form of Lord Narayana, and the description of Him is given in a dozen places in the "Vishnu Purana", bringing out the entire symbolism in Him clearly. Whether it is in Dhruva's poetic words at the time of his great "vision of Narayana", or in the beautiful song of Prahlada, or in the various songs of Narada, we find the symbolism described to explain what Vishnu stands for.

Traditionally, He is described as blue in colour clothed in yellow, wearing a crown and standing upon a lotus divine. He has four hands and He holds in them the Conch, (Sankha), the Discus, (Chakra), the Mace, (Gada), and the Lotus, (Padma). Every one of these represents a significant symbolism very scientifically employed to indicate that Vishnu is none other than the Divine mighty Self which is the Changeless Center around all changes, the Imperishable Essence in the midst of all the perishable finite things.

Blue is the colour of the Infinite and whatever is immeasurable can appear to the mortal eye only as blue; thus a cloudless summer sky is blue to us because the endless distance of space is interpreted by the physical eye as blue in colour. The yellow represents the earth. Anything that is buried in the earth gathers a yellowish hue, and in fire, earth (mud, silica) glows yellowish. Thus, Śrī Narayana represents the Immeasurable, All-Pervading Reality (blue colour) clothed in earthy matter (yellow colour), meaning Śrī Narayana is the Infinite clothed in matter; He is the Infinite expressed through a form.

When the Self (Atman) thus expresses through a form, an individual (jīva) is manifested. Every individual acts and accomplishes in the world, not with the mortal two hands alone, but with a subtle set of four hands. These four aspects that function from wtihin the physical equipment, together are called the "subtle body"; in Vedanta it is known as the inner equipment," constituted of the Mind, the Intellect, the Consciousness-of-them-all and the Ego. These four are symbolized in the form-representation of Lord Vishnu, having four hands.

The Lord wears a Divine Crown on His head to indicate His Sovereignity and Lord-ship over all names and forms. He is the sole proprietor of the entire universe. This mighty Infinite Lord dwells in the core of our personality as the very Self in us.

His hands are never empty — each is carrying a symbol, together indicating how He carries out his Divine duties as the preserver of the Universe. He blows the Conch, calling man to live the nobler values-of-life so that he may turn away from all his worldly preoccupations and ultimately reach Him and receive from Him the Infinite

Bliss of unbroken peace and perfection. This "final goal", indicated in our scriptures, is represented in Hindu tradition as the Lotus.

With a tender anxiety to give the devotee the highest experience of perfect happiness when He calls, man, roaming with his sensuous urges and animal propensities, heats the echoes of the shrill notes of his inner conscience calling him to stop and retire. Generally man has no ears to hear, or even when he hears he has no heart to obey. He still dashes forth in the quest for sense gratification — it is at such times, out of sheer love, the Lord wields His Mace to knock man down with disappointments, dissatisfactions and a growing sense of restlessness.

Even in spite of these punishments, if the devotee is not turning towards the spiritual path and is nor progressively moving towards the final destination, the Lord has the total annihilating power of the Discus which can destroy the equipment and lift him from his present life of unhealthy circumstances. This is true of an individual, a community, or a nation. Fascinated by the delusory joys of the sense-objects the human mind may dance forth to live a ruinous life of sense gratification. And if this material and purely sensuous way of life is continued in spite of the consequent mental tensions and strains, the society dissipates all its higher urges, loses even its common efficiencies and ultimately comes to lose all that it possessed and ends in a pitiful and disastrous fall. This is what history records and commonsense ever dictates.

We may even consider the 'hand that holds the Conch' as the intellect (buddhi), the 'hand that holds the Discus' as the ego, 'that which holds the Mace' as the mind (manas), and 'that which holds the Lotus' as the consciousness (chitta). The discriminating intellect gives us the call and points out a more rewarding way-of-life, and in case we ignore this silent whisper of the heart and plunge into a life of extroversion, the mind gives endless knocks to that personality. If even then, we are not able to realize our folly and withdraw our selves from the dissipating ways of living, the arrogant ego fattened by these stupidities of the mind in revolt against the intellect , ultimately drives the individual to its total doom.

On the other hand, in case we are able to listen to the call and surrender our ego and the mind in devotion to the Lord, we can surely come to His sacred feet, and receive the Lotus that He is offering to us as an eternal reward for an insignificant renunciation on our part.

When the inner organ of the mind, intellect and ego, are transcended, the Light of Consciousness that illumines them for us, Itself is discovered as the Pure Infinite Self.